The New Criterion

September 1997

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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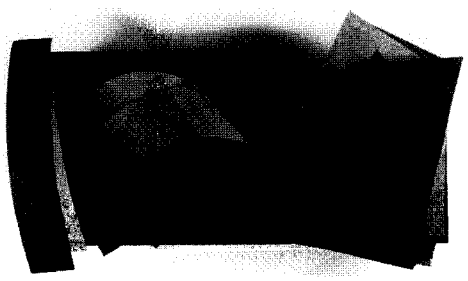

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. September 1997, Volume 16, Number 1. Subscriptions: $36 for one year, $65 for two. Outside the United States, add $7 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Subscribers: send all remittances, changes of address, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. For subscription problems call (800) 783-4903. Copyright © 1997 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. Internet: http://www.newcriterion.com E-mail: letters@newcriterion.com

Advertising: Galleries & fine arts: Fred Stern, 44 Paulin Boulevard, Leonia, NJ 07605. (201) 947-2674.
Publishers & others: Richard A. Vaughan, 129 Phelps Avenue, Rockford, IL 61108. (815) 398-8569.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

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Notes & Comments: September 1997

A Rich harvest of muddle

One of the occupational hazards that teachers and editors face is a special kind of vertiginous nausea. It is caused by certain forms of verbal muddle. The predominant sensations are exasperation and a feeling of helplessness: exasperation at having to wade through writing that approximates gibberish, helplessness at the prospect of untangling the nonsense. There is a third feeling—difficult to define—which experts describe as a sort of oscillation between wonder (at the stupidity on display) and irritation (ditto).

We had occasion to reflect on this phenomenon recently when an item from the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* for August 3 crossed our desk. It was written by the poetess and professional feminist Adrienne Rich. As an editor's note prefacing the piece explains, the *Book Review* asked Rich to write about why she refused the National Medal for the Arts, which had been offered to her by the White House in July.

It is a remarkable document—or two documents, really, since her explanation is followed by a copy of her letter to the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, Jane Alexander ("cc: President Clinton"). Both are seamless in their expression of pious outrage, undeviating in their assumption of superior virtue, single-minded in their devotion to political clichés and vapid artiness. They are also a hopeless muddle.

There are certain phrases that seem to have been permanently programmed into the word processors of the left-wing cultural establishment. Rich begins her piece by invoking a few of these dependable totems: "several years' erosion of arts funding," "hostile propaganda from the religious right," the "Republican Congress," "the House vote to end the National Endowment for the Arts"—and that is just in her first paragraph.

Like most of her comrades in arms, Rich thinks that curtailing funding of the National Endowment for the Arts confronts the United States with a moral, political, and artistic crisis of enormous proportions. It does no good to point out that the Endowment, like so many other bad ideas, came into being in the mid-1960s, that American culture—which included poets such as Adrienne Rich—somehow got along before that time without this method of dipping into the taxpayer's pocket, and that it will get along without doing so in the future. The Endowment has become a symbol

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to rally around, a cause to espouse, a victim to moralize over. Whether the Endowment actually advances or retards the arts is of strictly secondary importance. It has become a political, not a cultural, question.

On a scale of one to ten, Rich generally weighs in at about eight and a half—edging upwards toward nine on occasion—when it comes to queasy-making art-speak rhetoric. "My 'no,'" she tells her readers, "came directly out of my work as a poet and essayist and citizen drawn to the interfold of personal and public experience." As nonsense goes, "interfold of personal and public experience" is quite good. But Rich has a vast warehouse of such effects. No sooner did we recover from the "interfold" than she hits us with "the growing fragmentation of the social compact" (contract?) and "I had for years been feeling both personal and public grief, fear, hunger and the need to render this, my time, in the language of my art."

So many clichés, so little time! Readers pondering the phrase "social compact" should steel themselves; for by the end of her need and hunger to render this, her time, in the language of her art, Rich makes a meal of the idea of the social contract, trimming it with the watercress of environmentalism. "In the long run, art needs to grow organically out of a social compost nourishing to everyone, a literate citizenry, a free, universal, public education complex with art as an integral element, a society without throwaway people, honoring both human individuality and the search for a decent, sustainable common life." What! No more throwing people away on the social compost heap?

We had given some thought to the possibility that Rich was actually an expert parodist and that this was her masterly send-up of the arty, eco-feminist P.C. productions that are now such a conspicuous feature of NEA-sponsored cultural projects. Alas, no: Rich's grim earnestness makes the attractive possibility of parody implausible. In the real world, Marxism has been exploded as the most destructive and enslaving fantasy of the twentieth century. But in the moist purlieus of academic fatuousness it continues to function as an unlimited repository of moral indignation. So it is that Rich assures us that "the questions Marx raised are still alive and pulsing" even as she wistfully looks forward to performing "an autopsy on capitalism itself."

It has often been observed that many artists, when they take it upon themselves to make public pronouncements about politics and social policy, tend to make fools of themselves. This is true. But it has been too little observed, we think, how frequently certain artists make even bigger fools of themselves when they venture to make public pronouncements about art. For here an invincible narcissism combines with smarmy sentimentality about art to produce statements of supreme silliness. Rich furnishes a case in point. "And what about art?" she asks. The first two sentences are worth quoting in their entirety:

> Mistrusted, adored, pietized, condemned, dismissed as entertainment, auctioned at Sotheby's, purchased by investment-seeking celebrities, it dies into the "art object" of a thousand museum basements. It's also reborn hourly in prisons, women's shelters, small-town garages, community college workshops, halfway houses—wherever someone picks up a pencil, a wood-burning tool, a copy of "The Tempest," a tag-sale camera, a whittling knife, a stick of charcoal, a pawnshop horn, a video of "Citizen Kane," whatever lets you know again that this deeply instinctual yet self-conscious expressive language, this regenerative process, could help you save your life.

Students of rhetorical awfulness will have to labor long and hard to decide which is the

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most egregious element in this litany. Our candidate is the "wood-burning tool"—we will think of it fondly in the years ahead—but we acknowledge that the prisons, women's shelters, and halfway houses have a lot to be said for them, too.

There is much that is comic about Adrienne Rich's latest expostulation. Indeed, we have left out several choice bits—about the United States committing "genocide," for example, or its being "tyrannized by the accumulation of wealth as Eastern Europe was tyrannized by its own false gods." But in the end, there is something terribly sad about this exhibition of politicized sentimentality. Considered as a private performance, it is merely pathetic, but considered as a sign of the times—as an expression of an entrenched sensibility—it is something worse. Adrienne Rich speaks not for herself alone but for a prominent segment of what used to be called our cultural elite. It does not bode well for the social compost.

America's cultural revolution

When we began publishing *The New Criterion* in September 1982, we prefaced the first issue with a note detailing some reasons for wishing to start a new cultural review that aimed at providing a "dissenting critical voice." In the course of that note, we remarked on the "fateful collapse in critical standards" that was part of "a more general cultural drift." As for the source of that collapse, we observed that

> we are still living in the aftermath of the insidious assault on mind that was one of the most repulsive features of the radical movement of the Sixties. The cultural consequences of this leftward turn in our political life have been far graver than is commonly supposed. In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the introduction of kitsch into the museums to the decline of literacy in the schools to the corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic. Yet the subject is one that has scarcely been studied.

Over the course of the past fifteen years, we have had many occasions to comment on the disastrous legacy of the Sixties. And yet, despite this—and despite the publication of many books on the "culture wars"—no comprehensive assessment of the radical counterculture has yet appeared.

It is for this reason that we are inaugurating with this issue "Reflections on a Cultural Revolution." Written by Roger Kimball, this series of essays will run throughout our 1997–98 season and will provide a systematic analysis of the radical agenda of the counterculture. As with all revolutions, the promise of liberation figures centrally in the claims of the counterculture: liberation from the past, from the strictures of traditional morality, and from inherited canons of artistic and intellectual achievement. The results—in the emotional and intellectual life of our culture—have been as pernicious as they have been widespread. "Reflections on a Cultural Revolution" will provide a series of vivid damage reports, exposing the illusions of liberation foisted by a malign radicalism on the public which has rushed to embrace them.

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Reflections on a cultural revolution: I

Virtue gone mad

by Roger Kimball

Was the phenomenon in fact so extraordinary as contemporaries supposed? Was it as unprecedented, as profoundly subversive and world-changing as they thought? What was its true significance, its real nature, and what were the permanent effects of this strange and terrifying revolution? What exactly did it destroy, and what did it create?

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime*

The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: We ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risque congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints.

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

At the beginning of his book on the *ancien régime* and the French Revolution, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that "when great revolutions are successful their causes cease to exist, and the very fact of their success has made them incomprehensible." For an American writing at the end of the 1990s, it is tempting to repeat Tocqueville's words. For we, too, live in the aftermath of a momentous revolution: the revolution in morals and sensibility that swept with gathering force like a tsunami through North America and Western Europe from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. "We have witnessed," the philosopher Paul Oskar Kristeller observed in 1991, "what amounts to a cultural revolution, comparable to the one in China if not worse, and whereas the Chinese have to some extent overcome their cultural revolution, I see many signs that ours is getting worse all the time, and no indication that it will be overcome in the foreseeable future." Indeed, so successful was this revolution (if a calamity can rightly be described as "successful") that we forget, we fail to recognize, what immense changes this revolution brought in its wake: having changed ourselves, we no longer perceive our transformation.

These prosperous times are relatively placid. But make no mistake: the radical, emancipationist demands of the Sixties have not receded. They have—to an extent that is astonishing to contemplate—triumphed throughout society. They have insinuated themselves, disastrously, into the curricula of our schools and colleges; they have dramatically altered the texture of sexual relations and family life; they have played havoc with the authority of churches and other repositories of moral wisdom; they have undermined the claims of civic virtue and our national self-understanding; they have degraded the media and the entertainment industry, and subverted museums and other institutions entrusted with preserving and transmitting high culture. They have even, most poignantly, addled our hearts and innermost assumptions about what counts as the good life. As the political philosopher Harvey Mansfield noted recently in an essay called "The Legacy of the Six-

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ties," "the poison has worked its way into our souls, the effects becoming less visible to us as they become more ordinary."

"Revolution" is, of course, a strong word. And there are obvious differences between a political revolution that seeks to bring down a government by means of violence and a cultural revolution that, whatever its political ambitions, results first of all in a transformation in the conduct of life. There are also important differences between political revolutions that aim at establishing a limited, constitutional government, and those that—notwithstanding their slogans about freedom—aim at totalitarian tyranny. The Glorious Revolution in England in 1688 and the American Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century are the chief—perhaps the only—examples of the former; the latter, regrettably, are much commoner: the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution provide the archetypes.

It is worth stressing the prominent place that the totalitarian impulse occupies in most revolutionary movements, cultural as well political. America's war of independence from Britain, again, is unique, or near enough, in consistently eschewing the totalitarian option. From the very beginning, the Founding Fathers understood, as John Adams put it, that "neither morals, nor riches, nor discipline of armies, nor all these together will do without a constitution." How different this was from the Marxist-inspired tyranny visited upon Russia in 1917 or the megalomaniacal Rousseuvian variety that tore France apart in 1789. Indeed, the political fantasies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau have a great deal to answer for. For two centuries, his sentimentalizing utopian rhetoric has provided despots of all description with a means of pursuing conformity while praising freedom.

It is a neat trick. Words like "freedom" and "virtue" were ever on Rousseau's lips. But freedom for him was a chilly abstraction; it applied to mankind as an *idea*, not to individual men. ("I think I know man," Rousseau sadly observed near the end of his life, "but as for men, I know them not.") In the *Confessions*, he claimed to be "drunk on virtue." And indeed, it turned out that "virtue" for Rousseau had nothing to do with acting or behaving in a certain way toward others. On the contrary, the criterion of virtue was his subjective feeling of goodness. For Rousseau, virtue was a species of moral intoxication. Translated into the political sphere, Rousseau's ideas about freedom and virtue are a recipe for totalitarianism. "Those who dare to undertake the institution of a people," Rousseau wrote in the *Social Contract*, "must feel themselves capable, as it were, of changing human nature, . . . of altering the constitution of man for the purpose of strengthening it." Man is "born free," Rousseau famously wrote, but is "everywhere in chains." Alas, most men did not, according to him, truly understand the nature or extent of their servitude. It was his job to enlighten them—to force them, as he put it in one chilling epithet, to be free. Such "freedom" is accomplished, Rousseau thought, by bringing individual wills into conformity with what he called the "general will"—surely one of the most confused and tyrannical political principles ever enunciated. "If you would have the general will accomplished," he wrote, "bring all the particular wills into conformity with it; in other words, as virtue is nothing more than this conformity of the particular wills, establish the reign of virtue."

Establishing the reign of virtue is no easy task, as Rousseau's avid disciple Maximilien Robespierre discovered to his chagrin. All those "particular wills"—i.e., individual men and women with their diverse aims and desires—are so recalcitrant and so ungrateful for one's efforts to make them virtuous. Still, one does what one can. And the guillotine, of course, is a great expedient. Robespierre was no political philosopher. But he understood the nature of Rousseau's idea of virtue with startling clarity, as he showed when he spoke of "virtue and its emanation, terror." It is a remark worthy of Lenin, and a grim foreshadowing of the

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Marxist-Leninist rhetoric that informed a great deal of Sixties radicalism.

Rousseau is mentioned here because, acknowledged or not, he is the intellectual godfather of so much that happened in the cultural revolution of the 1960s. His narcissism and megalomania, his fantastic political ideas and sense of absolute entitlement, his sentimentalizing nature-worship, even his twisted, hypertrophied eroticism: all reappeared updated in the tumult of the 1960s. And so did the underlying totalitarian impulse that informs Rousseau's notion of freedom.

Writing in 1969, the sociologist Edward Shils summarized the chief components of the revolution he saw unfolding around him in his essay "Dreams of Plenitude, Nightmares of Scarcity." "The moral revolution," Shils wrote,

> consists in a demand for a total transformation—a transformation from a totality of undifferentiated evil to a totality of undifferentiated perfection. Evil consists in the deadening of sentiment through institutions and more particularly through the exercise of and subordination to authority. Perfection consists in the freedom of feeling and the fulfillment of desires. . . . A good community is like Rousseau's; the common will harmonizes individual wills. . . . The common will is not the resultant of the rationally arrived at assent of its members; it is not actually a *shared* decision making; . . . It is the transformation of sentiment and desire into reality in a community in which all realize their wills simultaneously. Anything less is repressive.

Two decades later, in an essay called "Totalitarians and Antinomians: Remembering the 30s and 60s," Shils elaborated on the theme of absolute fulfillment in his description of the "antinomian temptation." At the center of that temptation was the fantasy of absolute freedom. "The highest ideal of antinomianism," Shils wrote, "is a life of complete self-determination, free of the burden of tradition and conventions, free of the constraints imposed by institutional rules and laws and of the stipulations of authority operating within the setting of institutions." "Free," in other words, from the very things that underwrite freedom, that give it content, that prevent it from collapsing into that merely rhetorical freedom which always turns out to be another name for servitude.

The glorification of such spurious freedom is closely connected with another misuse of language—one of the most destructive: the description of irresponsible political naïveté as a form of "idealism." Nor is it only naïveté that gets the extenuating absolution of "idealism." So do all manner of crimes, blunders, and instances of brutality: all can be morally sanitized by the simple expedient of being rebaptized as examples of (perhaps misguided) "idealism." The one essential qualification is that the perpetrator be identified with the political Left. In her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt—who was certainly no enemy of the Left herself—cannily observed that

> one has often been struck by the peculiar selflessness of the revolutionists, which should not be confused with "idealism" or heroism. Virtue has indeed been equated with selflessness ever since Robespierre preached a virtue that was borrowed from Rousseau, and it is the equation which has put, as it were, its indelible stamp upon the revolutionary man and his innermost conviction that the value of a policy may be gauged by the extent to which it will contradict all particular interests, and that the value of a man may be judged by the extent to which he acts against his own interest and against his own will.

In fact, the "peculiar selflessness" that Arendt describes often turns out to be little more than an abdication of individual responsibility abetted by utter self-absorption. It is a phenomenon that, among other things, helps to explain the queasy-making spectacle of left-wing Western intellectuals falling over themselves in a vain effort to excuse, mitigate, or sometimes simply deny the crimes of the Soviet Union and other

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murderous left-wing regimes throughout the Cold War and beyond. Yes, Stalin (or Mao or Pol Pot or Fidel or whoever) was repressive (or maybe that is an ugly rumor propagated by the United States); perhaps he "went too far"; maybe some measures were "extreme"; this or that policy was "misjudged"; . . . but what a glorious idea is equality, community, the brotherhood of man, etc. The odor of piety that attends these rituals of exculpation is one of their most disagreeable features.

One sees the same thing in another key in the left-wing response to America's cultural revolution. Whatever criticisms might be made, they are quickly neutralized by invoking the totem of "idealism": for example, the "passionate belief" (the beliefs of radicals are never less than "passionate") in a "better world," in a "more humane society," in "equality." The assumption that "passion" redeems fatuousness, rendering it noble or at least exempting it from censure, is part of the Romantic background of the counterculture. It is a profoundly mistaken and destructive idea. As T. S. Eliot observed in *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (1934), the belief that there is "something admirable in violent emotion for its own sake, whatever the emotion or whatever the object," is "a cardinal point of faith in a romantic age." It is also, he noted, "a symptom of decadence." For it is "by no means self-evident," Eliot wrote,

> that human beings are most real when they are most violently excited; violent physical passions do not in themselves differentiate men from each other, but rather tend to reduce them to the same state; and the passion has significance only in relation to the character and behavior of the man at other moments of his life and in other contexts. Furthermore, strong passion is only interesting or significant in strong men, those who abandon themselves without resistance to excitements which tend to deprive them of reason, become merely instruments of feeling and lose their humanity; and unless there is moral resistance and conflict there is no meaning.

"Passion," like "idealism," is a nostrum that the Left prescribes to itself in order to relieve the burdens of responsibility.

G. K. Chesterton once observed that in the modern world "the virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity . . . is often untruthful." Something similar can be said about the virtues of freedom and idealism. Freedom is an important virtue. But it is not the only virtue. And apart from other virtues —apart from prudence, say, and duty and responsibility, all of which define and limit freedom—freedom becomes a parody of itself. It becomes, in a word, unfree. And so it is with idealism. Idealism remains a virtue only to the extent that the causes to which it devotes itself are worthy of the devotion they attract. The more abstract the cause, the more vacuous the idealism.

In a subtle essay called "Countercultures," first published in 1994, the political commentator Irving Kristol noted that the counterculture of the 1960s was in part a reaction against a society that had become increasingly secular, routinized, and crassly materialistic. In this respect, too, the counterculture can be understood as part of our Romantic inheritance, a plea for freedom and transcendence in a society increasingly dominated by the secular forces of Enlightenment rationality. Indeed, revolts of this tenor have been a staple of Romanticism since the nineteenth century: Dostoyevsky's "underground man," who seeks refuge from the imperatives of reason in willful arbitrariness, is only one example (a rather grim one) among countless others.

The danger, Mr. Kristol notes, is that the counterculture, in its attack on secular materialism, "will bring down—will discredit —human things that are of permanent importance. A spiritual rebellion against the constrictions of secular humanism could end up . . . in a celebration of irrationalism and a derogation of reason itself."

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At a time when the radical tenets of the counterculture have become so thoroughly established and institutionalized in cultural life—when they have, in fact, come more and more to *define* the dominant culture—unmasking illegitimate claims to "liberation" and bogus feats of idealism emerges as a prime critical task. Accordingly, a large part of these reflections on America's cultural revolution will be given over to the task of critical deconstruction. For over two hundred years, the Left has had an effective but unearned monopoly on the rhetoric of virtue. What is needed is a comprehensive assault on that monopoly. This is obviously not something that can be achieved all at once. Such rhetorical habits reflect a long-standing emotional investment, one not easily assailed by argument. But a start can be made by exposing the baselessness of so many radical claims to liberation and by demystifying the rancid "idealism" of a movement whose primary effect has been to debase the intellectual and moral currency of contemporary culture.

Books and other commentary about the 1960s and the "culture wars" have been appearing almost as fast as one can turn their pages. Many have been critical. Some are celebrations. In December 1994—to take just one example—*The New York Times*, obviously chastened by the recent Republican sweep in the 1994 congressional race, published an editorial "In Praise of the Counterculture." Challenging the "pejorative" use of the term "counterculture"—it was Newt Gingrich's description of Bill and Hillary Clinton as "counterculture McGoverniks" that really set the *Times* off—the editorialist castigated the "puritans" who criticized the "summery, hedonistic ethos" of the 1960s. Connoisseurs of cant will find much to savor in this brief document, beginning with the proposition that the 1960s "produced a renewal of the Thoreauvian ideal of the clear, defiant voice of the dissenting citizen." "Only a few periods in American history," the *Times* informed its readers, "have seen such a rich fulfillment of the informing ideals of personal freedom and creativity that lie at the heart of the American intellectual tradition. . . . The 60's spawned a new morality-based politics that emphasized the individual's responsibility to speak out against injustice and corruption."

In the coming months, we shall have occasion to examine some of the chief works and events that constituted this "rich fulfillment," these triumphs of "individual responsibility" and a "new morality-based politics." At the moment, it is enough to note the tenor of the *Times*'s encomium, its invocation of freedom and creativity, its assumption of a superior virtue that is barely distinguishable from a knowing if "summery" hedonism.

Critics of the counterculture have not been slow to attack the phenomena that the *Times* praises. Many palpable hits have been scored, and by now there exists a rich literature tabulating the excesses and absurdities of 1960s radicalism. Useful though much of that literature is, however, there has been no attempt to trace the overall course of America's cultural revolution, detailing its roots in the Beat sensibility of the 1950s, analyzing the primary issues and personalities that defined it, assessing the damage it has done to America's intellectual, moral, and artistic life. "What was its true significance, its real nature, and what were the permanent effects of this strange and terrifying revolution? What exactly did it destroy, and what did it create?" The questions with which Tocqueville began his book about the *ancien régime* and the French Revolution are also the questions that will guide these reflections on America's cultural revolution.

It remains to say something about the course that our discussion will take. We will begin in the 1950s with the emergence of the Beats, focusing particularly on such representative figures as the poet Allen Ginsberg and the novelist William Burroughs. The Beats are crucial to an understanding of America's cultural revolution not least because in their lives, their proclamations, and (for lack of a more accurate

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term) their "work" they anticipated so many of the pathologies of the Sixties and Seventies. Their programmatic anti-Americanism, their avid celebration of drug abuse, their squalid, promiscuous sex lives, their pseudo-spirituality, their attack on rationality and their degradation of intellectual standards, their aggressive narcissism and juvenile political posturing: in all this and more, the Beats were every bit as "advanced" as any Sixties radical.

If the Beats differed from their successors (and those Beat figures who survived long enough may be said to have succeeded their former selves to become prominent countercultural idols) it was less in their attitudes and behavior than in the attitudes and behavior of the culture at large. As the Sixties unfolded, attitudes that had characterized a tiny minority on the fringes of culture were more and more accepted into the mainstream. By the early 1970s, they had *become* the mainstream.

In this process of spiritual colonization, the Beats were aided by a number of intellectual fellow travelers, many of whom, though not Beats themselves, eagerly championed the Beat sensibility and, throughout the 1950s, provided the moral alibis with which the excesses of the Beats were explained and justified. In various ways, establishment writers like Norman O. Brown (*Life Against Death*), John Kenneth Galbraith (*The Affluent Society*), Paul Goodman (*Growing Up Absurd*), Michael Harrington (*The Other America*), Herbert Marcuse (*One Dimensional Man*, *Eros and Civilization*), C. Wright Mills (*White Collar*, *The Power Elite*), and William Whyte, Jr. (*The Organization Man*) "softened up" the culture at large, preparing it to assimilate—in many respects, to emulate—the Beats, their attitudes toward life, art, and above all toward the United States.

Every revolution has its myths. One of the myths dearest to the counterculture is that America in the 1950s was a sterile, soulless society, obsessed with money, stunted emotionally, negligible culturally and intellectually, brutal and hamfisted in its politics and social policy. Never mind that, when it came to cultural and intellectual achievement, America in the 1950s looks like fifth-century Athens in comparison with what came afterward. The image of America as a materialistic wasteland, barren of cultural achievement, was central to the cosmology of the Beats and, in differing ways, it was an image these writers and intellectuals strenuously reinforced. It will be instructive to sample some of these writings: Goodman's lugubrious *Growing Up Absurd*, for example, whose image of America as an evil, soul-destroying "Organized System" had an immense influence when it was first published in 1960, and Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959), whose toxic cocktail of Freud and Marx helped pave the way for the legitimization of hedonism that swept through the country in the years ahead.

As the 1950s wore on, anti-Americanism became a necessary badge of authenticity for writers and intellectuals; more and more, the cultural establishment demanded the pose of anti-establishment animus. Among those railing against the evils of America, the novelist Norman Mailer occupies a special place. Today, Norman Mailer is regarded by many as a grotesque figure, alternately repulsive and pathetic. There was a time, however, when he was widely considered to be not only a serious novelist but also a deep thinker. His career is an object lesson in the myopia of contemporary taste.

Prominent in Mailer's writings are a fascination with violence and an adolescent obsession with sex. Both feature centrally in his once-notorious essay "The White Negro" (1957). Fulminating in that essay against "the totalitarian tissues of American society," Mailer praises the "hipster" as someone who, having "absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro," accepts "the meaninglessness of life" and deliberately encourages the "psychopath" in himself. Devoted to jazz, drugs, violence, and sex, the hipster would think nothing of "beat[ing] in the brains of a candy-store keeper." As Mailer explains, "the psychopath

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murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence," a catharsis that for him is inextricably bound up with "apocalyptic" sex.

> At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one that preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy—he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him.

Mailer considered "The White Negro" "one of the best things I have ever done." Certainly it is one of the most characteristic.

The career of Norman Mailer is one that will figure prominently in these reflections; another is that of Susan Sontag. From the moment she burst upon the scene in the early 1960s with her essays "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on 'Camp,'" Sontag has been a model of radical chic. Indeed, from her declaration that "the white race *is* the cancer of human history" in the mid-Sixties to her travels to Bosnia to stage an all-female production of *Waiting for Godot* in the 1990s, Sontag has been a living compendium of radical clichés and stereotypes. In a report from Castro's Cuba in 1969, for example, she moves from declaring that "America is a cancerous society" to observing that "rock, grass, better orgasms, freaky clothes, grooving on nature—really grooving on anything—unfits, maladapts a person for the American way of life" to assuring her readers that "no Cuban writer has been or is in jail, or is failing to get his work published." To be sure, like Mailer, Sontag is at bottom a preposterous figure. But, again like Mailer, what prevents her from being simply a source of unintended comedy is the extent to which her aestheticizing political radicalism not only was taken seriously but also came to represent a major current of elite cultural opinion.

No account of America's cultural revolution would be complete without some discussion of the Vietnam War. More than any other event, it legitimated anti-Americanism and helped insinuate radical feeling into the mainstream of cultural life. What we will focus on in these reflections is not the history of the war itself or even the protest against it—those stories have been often told—but some central examples of how reaction to the war helped to "normalize" a spectrum of radical sentiments. The early history of *The New York Review of Books* (which began publishing in 1963) belongs here, in part for its reporting on the Vietnam War, in part for its increasingly enthusiastic embrace of other items in the menu of cultural radicalism. The disastrous effect of the war—or, more precisely, of the protests against the war—on our institutions of higher education also deserves attention. What we will be interested in here is not so much a history of student activism against the war: that, too, is an oft-told story. Our focus will be on a handful of exemplary case studies that show how the capitulation of certain key university presidents helped to sanction (and therefore recommend to the society at large) a whole set of radical attitudes, not only about the war and America's role in it, but also about art, education, and morality.

One prominent part of that radicalism concerns race. The destructive effects of America's cultural revolution on race relations in this country cannot be overestimated. In the transformation of the civil-rights movement into an agitation for black power, we see not only a new segregationism but also a blueprint for the "victim politics" and demands for political correctness that have so disfigured American culture in the 1980s and 1990s. The unhappy metamorphosis of James Baldwin—from a novelist who insisted that he was "not a black writer but an American one" to one who embraced the racialist politics of the black power movement—epitomized this trend. We will focus here not only on Baldwin but also on the celebration of violent black radicals like Eldridge Cleaver, whose assertion in his book *Soul on Ice* that rape is "an insurrectionary act" "trampling

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upon the white man's law" won abject praise from any number of *bien pensant* white radicals.

It has been in the life of art and the life of the mind, however, that the counterculture has had its most devastating effects. To an extent that would have been difficult to imagine thirty years ago, art and education have become handmaidens of political radicalism. Standards in both have plummeted. The art world has more and more jettisoned any concern with beauty and has become a playground for bogus "transgressive" gestures, while colleges and universities, aping this exhausted radicalism, have given themselves up to an uneasy mixture of politically correct causes and the rebarbative rhetoric of deconstruction, poststructuralism, and "cultural studies." The story of what has happened to our institutions of high culture since the Sixties is a story of almost uninterrupted degradation and capitulation to forces inimical to culture. We will outline this chronicle of decline, focusing particularly on the destruction of the humanities in higher education and the surrender of art to the perverting imperatives of politics.

The politicization of art and education represents one large part of the counterculture's legacy. The coarsening of feeling and sensibility is another. No phenomenon has done more to advance this coarsening than rock music. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of rock music to the agenda of the cultural revolution. It is also impossible to overstate its soul-deadening destructiveness. The most reviled part of Allan Bloom's book *The Closing of the American Mind* was his chapter criticizing the effects of rock music. But Bloom was right in insisting that rock music is a potent weapon in the arsenal of emotional anarchy. In truth, the triumph of rock music was not only an aesthetic disaster of gigantic proportions, it was also a moral disaster whose effects are nearly impossible to calculate precisely because they are so pervasive. We will take a critical look at the spiritual legacy of rock music, reconsidering Bloom's indictment and the heated arguments mounted against his analysis.

Inseparable from the culture of rock music is the celebration of drugs and the demand for sexual liberation. The three go together. They are the counterculture's primary instruments of ecstasy, its chief weapons against the obligations of traditional culture. It is still not clear which has done the most damage. Although drugs cut short thousands of lives and permanently maimed countless more, we suspect that the real competition is between rock music and the sexual revolution. Both promised boundless freedom; both involved the entire culture in moral chaos. At the end of *Life Against Death*, Norman O. Brown assured his readers that "the path of sublimation, which mankind has religiously followed since the foundation of the first cities, is no way out of the human neurosis, but, on the contrary, leads to its aggravation." According to Brown, what was needed was "a union with others and with the world around us based not on anxiety and aggression but on narcissism and erotic exuberance." Brown was writing in the late 1950s; the subsequent decades were not short on either narcissism or erotic exuberance. Whether the consequences of such narcissism and exuberance lessened or aggravated "the human neurosis" is a question we will consider in the coming months.

Near the beginning of her book *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt quotes the conservative thinker Joseph de Maistre who, looking back on the French Revolution in 1796, observed that "La contrerévolution ne sera point une révolution contraire, mais le contraire de la révolution": "The counter-revolution will not be a revolution in reverse, but the reverse of revolution." She dismisses this as "an empty witticism." But is it? Given the disastrous spiritual malaise brought on by America's cultural revolution, we may conclude that the way forward lies not in any sort of new revolution but, on the contrary, in the patient recovery of lost virtues: the antidote to revolution is not counterrevolution but recuperation.

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Abstraction & utopia

by Hilton Kramer

From theosophy to utopia

[Suprematism] will liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the work into a true model of perfection.
—El Lissitzky, 1920

Abstract art, I thought, creates new types of spatial relationships, new inventions of forms, new visual laws—basic and simple—as the visual counterpart to a more purposeful, cooperative human society.
—László Moholy-Nagy, 1928

In the future, the realization of pure plastic expression in palpable reality will replace the work of art. But in order to achieve this, orientation toward a universal conception and detachment from the oppression of nature is necessary. Then we will no longer have the need of pictures and sculpture, for we will live in realized art.
—Piet Mondrian, 1942

To construct a utopia is always an act of negation toward an existing reality, a desire to transform it.
—Leszek Kolakowski, 1968

Abstract art—painting and sculpture that makes no direct, immediately discernible reference to recognizable objects—was born of an alliance of modernist aesthetics and the occult doctrines of theosophy in the second decade of the twentieth century. Its first masterworks were produced by Vasily Kandinsky in Germany, Piet Mondrian in the Netherlands, and Kazimir Malevich in Russia. Yet no sooner was this new artistic convention established as an influence on the European avant-garde than it was quickly appropriated by still another mode of thought—utopianism—which similarly rejected commonly held conceptions of "reality" in the name of a visionary ideal. This utopian ideal, while no less mystical in some respects than that of theosophy, nonetheless differed from it in locating the realm of future perfection in the material world. Toward the material world utopian ideology adopted an attitude as radical—and, in fact, as otherworldly—as any to be found in occult doctrine, but it did not question the existence of the material world. Its goal was to change it—to eliminate its imperfections in order to establish an ideal harmony, at once social and spiritual, in every sphere of earthly human endeavor.

Whereas theosophical belief is essentially religious in nature, utopian thought is fundamentally political, for it seeks to realize its model of human perfection by bringing about a radical transformation of society and its institutions. While both envision an ideal future, it is in the nature of utopian thought to imagine that the particular "heaven" it hypothesizes can be created on earth.

It should not be supposed, however, that an allegiance to mysticism precludes a commitment to utopian ideology. On the con-

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trary, these apparently contradictory doctrines have proved to be highly compatible systems of belief. Both refuse to acknowledge either the limits of human nature or the legitimate conflicts of interest that characterize virtually every form of human society. Both are attempts to transcend the contingencies of history for the purpose of achieving an eternal order so perfect as to lie beyond the need of dissension or modification. Yet utopian ideology departs from occult belief in a fierce yearning to effect a sweeping transformation of material life by means of political action.

The political models to which the pioneers of abstract art attached their utopian dreams, though generally of a socialist character, were by no means uniform, however much they may have been thought to resemble each other in the eyes of their adversaries. The leading figures of the Russian avant-garde—Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Popova, et al.—were fervent supporters of revolution, and welcomed the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 as the dawn of a new millennium. And it was in Russia, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution of 1917, that these champions of abstraction came to enjoy an unprecedented authority over the conduct of cultural life.

The utopian impulses of the De Stijl movement in the Netherlands, which also dates from 1917, were more restricted, and certainly less strident. While no less militant than the Russian avant-garde in its artistic objectives—and initially sympathetic to the Bolshevik cause—the De Stijl group remained aloof from any organized involvement in revolutionary politics. De Stijl was a movement confined to avant-garde artists, architects, designers, and art theorists. While in some respects an antiwar movement that took the horrors of the First World War to represent everything that was moribund in the European past, it never came under the jurisdiction of political commissars or party functionaries. Its primary influence—its primary achievement, too—would always be aesthetic. Its concept of utopia had more to do with ideas about painting and a redesign of the man-made environment than with programs of political action. It helped, of course, that the Netherlands itself remained neutral in the war.

In Germany, and in Central and Eastern Europe, where both Russian modernism and the De Stijl movement wielded immense influence in avant-garde circles, the relation that obtained between the aesthetics of abstraction and the utopian impulse varied from group to group—and sometimes from year to year—in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution and the termination of the First World War.

The most celebrated citadel of avant-garde design to be established in Europe in the period between the two world wars—the Bauhaus, founded by the German architect Walter Gropius in Weimar in 1919—initially billed itself as the "Cathedral of Socialism," and from the outset was imbued with a radical fervor that was believed, especially by its enemies on the political Right, to reflect revolutionary goals. Yet the radicalism of the Bauhaus, while generally socialist in its announced ideals, was in practice a more volatile and bizarre amalgam of artistic, mystical, and collectivist ideas than its socialist reputation suggests. Its ranks were rife with the followers of occult sects, bohemian lifestyles, food cults, and sundry other manifestations of a free-wheeling counterculture.

At the same time, practical considerations required the Bauhaus to collaborate with industry and commerce, for its principal endeavors were addressed to the theory and practice of architectural, industrial, and graphic design, not to the production of fine art. In its early years, its contribution to abstraction was more theoretical than practical. It wasn't until the late 1920s, when the Bauhaus had entered upon the crisis that preceded its shutdown in 1933, that the most distinguished artists on its teaching staff—Vasily Kandinsky and Paul Klee—were first permitted to offer studio instruction in abstract painting.

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It was in Russia, far more decisively than elsewhere, that abstraction was first drawn into the orbit of utopian thought in ways that determined its fate. In no other country did its peculiar combination of aesthetic radicalism and metaphysical yearning so quickly impel abstraction in the direction of political revolution. And in no other country did a triumphant revolution go so far in embracing abstraction as an instrument of cultural and political change. It was therefore in Russia, in the decade following the Revolution of 1917, that a new alliance of abstract art and utopian ideology was put to its severest historical test.

The artistic momentum that set the Russian avant-garde on this radical course was already well established before the Revolution itself. The roots of Russian modernism—abstract art included—are to be found in the cosmopolitan culture of the pre-Soviet Russian liberal intelligentsia that was in close touch with the latest artistic and intellectual developments in France, Germany, and Italy. The ideas of the Expressionist movement in Germany, including Kandinsky's *Blue Rider* group in Munich, and those of the Futurist movement in Italy were well-known in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but it was the art of the Paris avant-garde that dominated the thinking of the Russian modernists in their accelerating quest for the absolute.

Crucial to this development were the great collections of the modernist School of Paris that had been amassed by two remarkable Russian businessmen, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. With their immense holdings in the most advanced painting of the Paris school—especially the works of Matisse and Picasso—these collections played a central role in acquainting the artists of the burgeoning Russian avant-garde with splendid examples of the new Fauvist and Cubist art long before such objects were exhibited in significant numbers in the museums of the Western world. Then, too, a number of the artists who would shortly be counted among the early creators of abstract art in Russia made their personal pilgrimages to the French capital. Mikhail Larionov, who in 1913 issued a manifesto on behalf of Rayonist painting—a more or less abstract pictorial style claiming to be based on "forms chosen by the will of the artist"—had visited Paris as early as 1906 in connection with the Russian exhibition organized by Sergei Diaghilev for that year's Salon d'automne. (It was in the Salon d'automne a year before that the Fauvist paintings of Matisse were first exhibited.) Liubov Popova, one of the stars of the early Soviet avant-garde, served an apprenticeship to Cubism in Paris in 1912–13. Around that time, too, Vladimir Tatlin, who would win lasting fame for his *Monument to the Third International* (1919), wangled his way into Picasso's Paris studio, where he had his first glimpse of the artist's constructed Cubist reliefs—a new mode of sculpture not yet known to the public. This led, in 1915–16, to the creation of Tatlin's even more radical Corner Counter-Reliefs, abstract constructions made of metal and other materials that, unlike Picasso's constructed sculpture, no longer made any discernible reference to recognizable objects. Similar pilgrimages to Paris were made by Naum Gabo, Ivan Puni, and others, and key documents of the Paris avant-garde, like the writings of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger on Cubism, were promptly translated into Russian.

Russian modernists were by no means alone, of course, in submitting to the influence of the Paris avant-garde in this period, but what they made of that influence was nonetheless remarkable even in an era known for its artistic audacities. For it was in the nature of Russian modernism to seize upon every innovation imported from abroad and propel its development in an even more radical direction than its originators had envisioned. As a result, the pre-Soviet Russian avant-garde promptly created more extreme varieties of pure abstraction than could be found in the advanced art of any Western European or North American art capital.

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In this headlong rush into pure abstraction, a volcanic mixture of occult doctrine, political fervor, futuristic fantasy, and incendiary dreams of cultural revolution acted as a powerful stimulus. However pure or simplified its forms, abstract art in Russia was seldom looked upon as art-for-art's-sake even by pronounced aesthetes. Whatever its roots in mystical doctrine, abstraction was conceived to serve social, historical, and other purposes larger than itself. In the years leading up to the Revolution of 1917, cultural life in Russia acquired an increasingly apocalyptic character that favored extreme solutions to all the problems of art, life, and thought. In this circumstance, abstract art—precisely to the extent that it eliminated all trace of or reverence for the world as it was—had the advantage of addressing its public as, in Leszek Kolakowki's words, "an act of negation toward an existing reality." This in itself gave to the aesthetics of abstraction a utopian imperative.

Theo van Doesburg & De Stijl's utopian aesthetic

The creation of a new world has commenced.
—Theo van Doesburg, *De Stijl*, August 1921

To succeed in elevating its acts of negation to the level of a comprehensive and influential artistic program, every avant-garde movement requires, in addition to the achievement of a master talent to set its aesthetic course, the services of a robust *animateur*—an artist-activist capable of commanding attention, forging alliances, winning converts, and otherwise advancing the cause. Mondrian, while undoubtedly De Stijl's master talent and the only major artist to be closely associated with the group, was temperamentally ill-equipped to perform such worldly tasks. The role of the movement's *animateur* therefore fell to Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), a determined avant-gardist painter, writer, and intellectual whose artistic ambitions often exceeded the scope of his talents but whose gifts as a cultural impresario and propagandist were irrepressible.

It was van Doesburg who organized De Stijl as a movement and established its presence in the European avant-garde in the 1920s. He wrote some of its key documents, he was the editor of its journal—called *De Stijl*—and he was its principal liaison with other avant-garde groups, particularly Dada and the Bauhaus. He became, in fact, something like the movement's Apollinaire or Marinetti—a tireless proselytizer of its radical aesthetic who was himself "the prototype of the anti-bourgeois," as the Dutch writer Joost Baljeu called him. As early as 1914, though he had yet to produce a significant work of art or anything like an artistic manifesto, van Doesburg imagined himself making, as he said, "a daring, spiritual crusade throughout artistic and intellectual Europe." His opportunity came with the founding of De Stijl in 1917.

The ideas and aspirations that Mondrian and van Doesburg brought to De Stijl were anything but identical, however. For Mondrian, painting was a spiritual vocation. Once established, the principles of his Neo-Plasticism—the reduction of pictorial form to the square and the rectangle, with a palette limited to black, white, and the primary colors—remained inviolate. Anything that suggested a residual dependency on subjective expression was regarded as a failure to conform to the universal "reality" Mondrian believed he had achieved in his Neo-Plastic compositions. Hence the strict observance of a pictorial syntax based on the right angle. As Mondrian once observed to the American painter Carl Holty: "Curved lines are too emotional." "Curved lines," of course, was a reference to Nature. Even shades of gray had to be eliminated from the painter's palette as an impermissible compromise.

Whatever may have been his interest in some possible equivalent of Neo-Plasticism in the fields of architecture and design—he seems to have been content to consign such endeavors to some hypothetical future—Mondrian himself remained exclusively oc-

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cupied with the "reality" of his own painting and the synthesis of aesthetic and occult ideas governing its creation. Yet under van Doesburg's leadership, De Stijl embraced a cultural agenda that went beyond painting to include not only architecture and design but literature, music, and indeed—at least in theory—all of cultural life. As a consequence, Mondrian's relation to De Stijl was bound to be more problematic than anyone, least of all van Doesburg, was willing to acknowledge at the outset of their collaboration. Mondrian was nothing if not candid in underscoring for van Doesburg the exact nature of his own artistic interests. "You must remember," he wrote to van Doesburg in February 1917, "that my things are still intended to be paintings, that is to say, not part of a building. Furthermore, they have been made in a small room." Which, at the very least, placed his painting at a certain distance from the architectural ambitions van Doesburg envisioned for De Stijl.

Yet, the originality of Mondrian's achievement as a pure abstractionist was fundamental to the founding of De Stijl. The aesthetic that Mondrian was perfecting during the early years of the war was understood to be essential to the movement's success—so much so that van Doesburg agreed to postpone the publication of the journal that became *De Stijl* until Mondrian felt ready to participate. This proved to be a shrewd decision, for the treatise that Mondrian wrote for *De Stijl* at van Doesburg's instigation on "Neo-Plasticism in Pictorial Art," which was serialized in the issues of 1917–18, did much to define the radical aesthetic character of the entire movement. For the moment, moreover, van Doesburg's own work as an abstract painter, though it still derived from the kind of representational subject matter that Mondrian had now permanently abandoned, showed every outward sign of conforming to the master's prohibitions. So certain fundamental differences that separated their respective views not only of art but of the movement itself were left in abeyance.

Yet painting was never more than one of van Doesburg's many avant-garde interests, and not always the dominant one. He certainly did not share Mondrian's view of painting as a spiritual vocation. For the whole mystical element in New-Plasticism he seems to have felt little affinity. He was more interested in the social functions of abstract art than in its religious significance or its occult sources. He was thus just the *animateur* that was needed to bring De Stijl's mystical conception of abstract art into alignment with the aspirations of utopian politics. It is no easy task, however, to establish the exact character of van Doesburg's own political beliefs. He was anything but a stickler for ideological clarity or linguistic precision.

"Capitalists are deceivers," he wrote in 1921, "and so are the Socialists." And further: "The first, second and third Socialist Internationals constituted ridiculous nonsense," and so on. What he then called for as an alternative to this "nonsense" was an "International of the Mind," which he seems to have conceived of as something resembling De Stijl's ambition to transcend what was stigmatized as Europe's tradition of "intellectual and material individualism." In the utopian "International of the Mind" that van Doesburg envisioned, individualism in society was—like lyricism in art—rejected in favor of something more "universal." In practice, this might mean nothing more revolutionary than the effort of abstract artists like himself, who made an absolute of straight lines, geometric form, and unmixed color, to ally themselves with like-minded modernist architects in creating immaculate urban designs devoid of traditional decorative embellishments. Or it might signify something more political—the dream of a utopian collectivism in which the De Stijl aesthetic would inevitably be established as the final arbiter not only of art and design but of all cultural life. Van Doesburg's writings on the subject, while unmistakably collectivist in spirit, are consistently vague about particulars.

Lecturing on "The Will to Style" in Ger-

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many in 1922, for example, he insisted that "Only collective solutions can be decisive in the realms of both politics and art," which seemed to place his program squarely in the camp of the Bauhaus radicals and the Bolshevik loyalists in the Soviet avant-garde. Yet van Doesburg himself turned out to be too much of an unreconstructed, ego-driven modern individualist to conform even to the very limited "collective solutions" of his comrades in the De Stijl circle —Mondrian in particular—never mind the more sweeping solutions advocated by his counterparts in the Soviet avant-garde.

By 1926 van Doesburg had openly broken with the principles of Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism in order to advance his own mode of abstraction. This was grandly dubbed Counter-Plastic Elementarism, which amounted to little more than the introduction of the diagonal into Neo-Plasticism's orthogonal orthodoxy. Then he compounded the heresy by ridiculing the concept of "spirit," which he now ascribed to "witches, fortune-tellers and Theosophists"—in other words, charlatans. This was, of course, a calculated affront. Theosophy was the philosophical foundation on which Mondrian had based his entire abstract *oeuvre*. It was one of the core doctrines on which De Stijl had been founded. The very terms "De Stijl" and "Neo-Plasticism" were derived from the mystical writings of Mondrian's philosophical mentor, M. H. J. Schoenmakers. This was heresy indeed. It was also a sign that van Doesburg, having established relations with Dada and the Bauhaus, now saw himself as the *animateur* of a much larger project—a Europe-wide, if not worldwide, avant-garde in the service of a utopian aesthetic.

In retrospect, van Doesburg can be seen to have been preparing himself for this larger role for some years. A man much given to adopting pseudonyms—even "Theo van Doesburg" was a pseudonym; his real name was Christiaan Emil Marie Küpper—van Doesburg had established a separate identity as a Dutch Dadaist poet, calling himself I. K. Bonset, as early as 1918 when he began a correspondence under that name with Tristan Tzara, one of the original instigators of Dada. (Mondrian, who was at first unaware of the deception, actually cautioned van Doesburg not to publish I. K. Bonset in *De Stijl*.) "There is little doubt," writes Joost Baljeu, "that van Doesburg saw Dada's revolutionary character and its engagement in the destruction of an old culture as a necessary preparation for the realization of De Stijl's utopian aims." Be that as it may, van Doesburg was clearly attracted to the anarchist-nihilist element in Dada even as he was promoting the principles of utopian order as the leader of De Stijl. Under still another pseudonym—Aldo Camini—van Doesburg also adopted the stance of a Dada anti-philosopher, drawing his inspiration from Tzara's *Manifesto of Mr. Aa the Anti-philosopher* (1918), to attack Kant, Hegel, and the whole school of German idealist philosophy (for which other members of the De Stijl circle felt a close affinity), as well as Schoenmakers, De Stijl's resident philosopher.

Meanwhile, van Doesburg was also busily at work establishing his bona fides with the leadership of the Bauhaus. He later claimed that Gropius had invited him to join the Bauhaus faculty, but this, like so many of van Doesburg's boasts, turned out to be something of a fiction. According to Gropius,

> I have never invited van Doesburg to the Bauhaus. He came there of his own initiative because he was attracted by our courses. He hoped to become a professor here at the Bauhaus, but I did not give him a position, since I judged him to be aggressive and fanatic and considered that he possessed such a narrow, theoretical view that he could not tolerate any diversity of opinion.

The latter point isn't quite correct, however, for van Doesburg wasn't at all averse to a "diversity of opinion" so long as he was free to claim every one of the diverse ideas he espoused as wholly his own.

In the end, it remains difficult to know

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what, if anything, van Doesburg really believed in beyond a vague, idealized utopian future from which the "old culture" of Europe had at last been expunged—a project in which the aesthetics of abstraction was seen to play a key role, and in which van Doesburg himself would be the intellectual leader. It was not to be, of course. By the end of the 1920s, the modernist avant-garde was already in retreat in the Soviet Union. In Western Europe, Dada was succumbing to the blandishments of Surrealism, which rejected the aesthetics of abstraction, and the Bauhaus was heading toward political disaster. As it was, van Doesburg was probably fortunate to die when he did—in 1931, at the age of fifty-eight—with his utopian dreams intact and his megalomania undiminished. Had he lived another decade, he would probably have ended up as a university professor in capitalist America, which, while not a fate worse than death, would not have borne much resemblance to that "daring, spiritual crusade throughout artistic and intellectual Europe" that he had imagined for himself in 1914. But then, the entire character of "artistic and intellectual Europe" was altered when Hitler came to power in 1933 in ways that van Doesburg had never imagined, and, in that altered Europe, De Stijl's vision of a utopian future was one of the many avant-garde dreams that died of inanition.

Mondrian, however, proved to be a hardy survivor of De Stijl's demise and illusions. Working in Paris in the heyday of Surrealism's dominion in the 1930s, he went his own way, secure in his convictions, confident of his goals, never wavering in the faith that supported an art untouched by adverse circumstance; and in the end, in New York City of all places, found his final inspiration in the closest thing to the utopian future he had ever encountered.

Part Two of "Abstraction and Utopia," dealing with the Soviet avant-garde and the Bauhaus, will be published in the October issue of *The New Criterion*.

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Canada: awash in hyphenation

by Mark Steyn

It was business as usual this Canada Day—July 1. "Queen Hails Canada's Diversity," said the headline in the Montreal *Gazette*. The Toronto *Globe and Mail* agreed: "Diversity of Country and People Amazing, Monarch Tells Ottawa Crowds." Yes, indeed, as Her Majesty put it in her Canada Day address, "The diversity of the country and the people never fails to amaze me."

She also said: "In that diversity lies much strength."

And in case we still hadn't got it: "Celebrate the unique Canadian ability to turn diversity to the common good."

By this stage, a few of us were pining for a little more diversity in vocabulary—not the queen's fault, but that of her Canadian ministers, who draft her speeches. It would be fun to sit in on their brainstorming sessions: "How about 'Celebrate the diversity of our tolerance'?" "No, we did that last year. Let's go with 'Celebrate the tolerance of our diversity.' Or 'Tolerate the celebration of our diversity.'"

By Canada Day, the queen was probably reaching the limits of her own tolerance. While most of the world's press had decamped to Hong Kong to mark the alleged setting of the sun on the British Empire, Canada's head of state was in Newfoundland, to mark the five-hundredth anniversary of John Cabot's landing. In other words, the queen was subtly reminding us that, whatever the ironies in Communism's last conscripts being seven million British subjects delivered up to the butchers of Tiananmen, Hong Kong was an aberration; the real story of the British Empire was here in Newfoundland, where, as in dozens of other equally unpromising territories around the globe, a settlement had become a colony and then a country, built on the foundations of English common law and parliamentary democracy. The British Empire didn't "decline" or "fall"; it evolved—as exemplified by the curious spectacle of thousands of free-born citizens cheering a non-resident head of state who deigns to drop in on them for a few days now and then.

The effect was somewhat spoiled when various "First Peoples"—that's this week's preferred designation for Inuits and Indians—and the usual guilt-ridden white folks declared that Cabot's arrival had been a disaster and that the queen would do better to issue a Clinton-style apology on behalf of her forebear for allowing the guy to load up his boat in the first place. Her Majesty's reaction to this suggestion is not known, but, given the state of modern Canada, the notion of apologizing for ever starting the thing is not without its appeal.

In the meantime, we have the Top-Free Rights Campaign. Last year, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a movement by Ontario feminists to "de-eroticise the breast" and decided that women had as much right as men to go about in public topless. For the long winter months, this right was

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mostly theoretical: when it's forty below, even Ontario feminists don't want to huddle round braziers brazenly burning their brassieres. But come this summer and suddenly topless women were everywhere, strolling the streets, browsing the department stores, and sipping iced coffees in brasseries. In America, "No shirt, no shoes, no service"; in Canada, "No blouse, no bra, no big deal." Inevitably, on a royal walkabout in Ontario not long before Canada Day, Her Majesty found herself confronted by a breast-baring subject whose torso bore the patriotic legend, "GOD BLESS THE QUEEN." She gritted her teeth and passed on: tolerance, tolerance . . .

Not everyone was so relaxed. A couple of weeks later, out on Lake Michigan, a topless boater genially lunching on deck was stopped by the coast guard and asked to put her clothes back on. She declined, insisting that it was her right as a Canadian to bare her breasts. They politely explained that they were the *American* coast guard and that she was now in U.S. waters, and then they arrested her. Naval skirmishes between the two countries are not uncommon: in 1994 HMCS *Fraser* seized two Massachusetts scallop draggers in international waters for breaching an agreement regulating "the harvesting of sedentary bottom-feeders on the continental shelf." (Canada's position is that the Icelandic scallop is sedentary; the U.S. does not regard him as such, on the grounds that he moves once a month. In the land of couch-potato lardbutts, moving once a month qualifies as hyperactive.) But, clearly, sedentary bottom-feeders are not as potentially disruptive to international relations as sedentary topless feeders.

The militant nudist movement may well prove to be a whole new treasure chest for Canada's much-vaunted tolerance. We have been awash in hyphenation for decades, eagerly welcoming new citizens, from Azerbaijani-Canadians to Zanzibari-Canadians, with our super-tolerant motto of "When in Ottawa, do as the Romans do, or the Serbs, or the Croats . . ." Once upon a time, the bit in Canadian public ceremonies in which the country's various ethnic groups perform folk dances in traditional dress used to zip along in a brisk six hours or so. Now, whether at the opening of Toronto's Skydome or the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, after six hours you'll be lucky to be up to the Estonian-Canadian clog dance. It's obvious that, like a stamp collector with an unlimited budget, we've now got at least one of everything.

In 1993, while U.S. forces were bogged down in Somalia, few Canadians were surprised when it emerged that the wife of elusive warlord General Aidid and six of his children were living on welfare in Toronto. And we're not talking soup-kitchens here: Ontario's benefits system was sufficiently generous to support so many trips back to Mogadishu that Mrs. Aidid must have been a shoo-in for Somali Airways's Frequent Flyer of the Month award. By then, U.S. policy in Somalia had withered away to: get General Aidid and get the hell out. They never did find him, and to this day I can't understand why, instead of that vast army, they didn't just disguise a couple of Marines as Ontario welfare officials cracking down on deadbeat dads.

But clearly, if we're to continue to expand our reputation for boundless tolerance, our hyphenation policy will have to be extended to other societal sub-groups—like the Topless-Canadian community and War-Criminal-Canadians (a surprisingly large community, thanks to the relaxed attitude of immigration officials). As a prominent member of the Irish-Belgian-Non-Genocidal-Clothist-Canadian community (a small annual parade, but we do our best), I naturally welcome the opportunity to congratulate myself on the ever increasing diversity of my tolerance.

Sometimes I find myself missing that now extinct species, the Canadian-Canadian, and absent-mindedly begin looking for him. A year or two back, someone sent me *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*, its contents page brimming with titles like "Bear Country" and "Red Plaid

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Shirt." In the mood for a story about bears, I turned to page 218, only to find that "Bear Country" (by Audrey Thomas) is, in fact, a story about a bilingual feminist performance artist. True, "Red Plaid Shirt" (by Diane Schoemperlen) is about a red plaid shirt, but not perhaps in the way one might wish:

> RED: . . . the colour of meat dripping lobster cracking claws lips nipples blisters blood my blood and all power.

It's a mystery to me why Americans find Canada boring. The obvious reason is that America's the dominant power and Canada lies feebly in its shadow, watching American TV, driving American cars (even the head of state has to make do with a royal Buick) . . . But one could easily make the case that this is mere surface flimflam: as the nudist hordes threatening Michigan reveal all too well, when you peel off that Gap T-shirt, what's underneath is proudly, gloriously Canadian. Certainly, Canada doesn't seem to have been influenced in the slightest by things that most Americans take for granted—like capitalism, or non-confiscatory taxation. Indeed, when it comes to the big ideas, you could argue that Canada's had far more impact on the U.S. At any rate, we seem to have got there first. Bilingualism? Been there, *fait ca*. Multiculturalism? It's been official federal government policy since 1971. Back then, Canadians used to explain that whereas America was a melting pot, Canada was a salad bowl—whether Italian-Canadians, Ukrainian-Canadians, or Haitian-Canadians, we were all freestanding vegetables linked only by a metaphorical maple-flavored salad dressing slopping around our feet. It has been amazing to me to see how swiftly and unobtrusively the salad bowl thesis has dribbled south of the forty-ninth parallel and virtually eliminated one of the most fiercely held principles of the Republic: *E Pluribus Unum*. The Clintonian view of the state—as a collection of disparate group identities in need of a strong central government to act as arbiter and distributor of largesse—is quintessentially Canadian.

Does it work? The federal government seems to think so, judging from the insufferably smug slogan of its tourism promotions in American magazines: "The World Needs More Canada." Oh, really? On the evidence of this last Canada Day, *Canada* needs more Canada; the idea of the state as little more than a sort of anthropological holding camp has proved insufficient, as is all too plain when you examine the differences between our two countries' national holidays: in most towns across the U.S., those Fourth of July fireworks, the hokey parades of Boy Scouts and fire trucks, the Uncle Sam costumes are the result of the hard work and fundraising efforts of the citizenry; on July 1, in most towns across Canada, pretty well every expression of national celebration comes courtesy of the federal government. Otherwise, nothing would happen. For example, Sheila Copps, deputy prime minister until the election earlier this year, presided over a "Heritage" department whose principal function was to distribute Canadian flags to Canadians. If an American wants a Stars and Stripes to wave at an Independence Day parade, he goes to All-For-A-Dollar. If a Canadian wants a Maple Leaf to wave at a Canada Day parade, he calls a 1-800 number, comes through to one of Ms. Copps's minions, gives his name and address and, after his request has been processed through the requisite number of Anglophone and Francophone bureaucrats for a couple of months, receives a flag in the mail for a total cost to the Canadian taxpayer of $179.99.

It's not just flags, of course. At the Jacques Cartier pier in old Montreal, I noticed the fellow on my left had a cardboard cap saying "Smile Everyone, It's Canada Day!"—a message from "Canadian Heritage." Years of exposure to federal government slogans have given most of us a high pain threshold, but, even so, this one began to make me feel queasy and, in an effort to escape, I moved to the guy's other side. Now he was on my right, which meant his

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cardboard cap said, "La Fete du Canada, affichez votre sourire!"—a message from "Patrimoine Canadien." Many governments talk through their hats but at least Canada's does it bilingually. Not many people were smiling—factoring in the *soi-disant* (as we say in Quebec) "Humidex," it must have been at least forty-three degrees (we're Celsius types up here)—and there was no shade anywhere on the pier. But, all around, from every flagpole fluttered the cheery government logo for this Canada Day: a huge cartoon maple leaf with a jolly smile. Big Brother is grinning at you.

Imagine Cambodia if it had been taken over by the Partridge Family instead of the Khmer Rouge, and you'll have a fair approximation of modern, government-approved Canadian nationalism. Pol Pot, you'll recall, ushered in Year Zero: history began with him. But, in fairness to the old mass murderer, he did not intend to halt history itself, to deny the passage of time, to establish a permanent Year Zero. That's been left to the lo-cal, easy-listening Cambodia of the frozen north. On the Jacques Cartier pier that day, addressing a couple of dozen new citizens, Lucienne Robillard, the federal minister for citizenship and immigration, said: "Fifty years ago, we were British subjects. We forget how young a country we really are." Actually, Mme. Robillard, for a citizenship minister, forgets more than she realizes: *twenty* years ago, Canadians were British subjects. What she means is that, fifty years ago, we were *just* British subjects, before Canada decided to become the first country in the Commonwealth to bestow additionally its own localized citizenship. What's Mme. Robillard saying? That there were no Canadians till 1947? That in 1946 a prairie farmer or a Cape Breton lobsterman didn't feel as fully Canadian as he did the following year? A couple of days earlier, the queen had marked the anniversary of Cabot's landing—half a millennium of history. Canada is the result of centuries of constitutional development: by comparison with most of the rest of the world, we're a very *old* country.

Canada Day would be an appropriate day to reflect on this, if it weren't that Canada Day is itself a sham. Until fifteen years ago, it was called Dominion Day, because that's what it was: the day on which Canada, in 1867, became a Dominion. The new country's name—the Dominion of Canada—was chosen in part because the imperial government in London thought "Kingdom of Canada" would offend the Americans. The word *Dominion* came to define the Empire's evolution into a free association of independent states bound only by allegiance to a common Crown: in that sense, it's one of the few genuinely Canadian words. But, somewhere along the way, Canadian politicians grew to feel squeamish about "Dominion," so they changed it to Canada Day. Well, it's certainly a Day, and it's in Canada, but how revealing of the new thinking that a day supposed to honor our history should in its very nomenclature be a rejection of that history. Funnily enough, ever since they gave it that meaningless name, it's been a meaningless day. There hasn't been a significant Canada Day in a decade and a half, unless you count 1989, when Hugh Hefner, who's always been partial to Canucks, married northern Playmate Kimberley Conrad.

Perhaps, in gratitude to Hef, we should change the name to Playmate Day. After all, our governing elite is not so different from an insecure aging centerfold—Mme. Robillard's remarks conform to the official, federally sponsored nationalism which has declared that we must always be young, always be ready to submit to another round of cosmetic surgery. Year Zero never ends. Is it 1965, when we changed the flag? Or 1980, when we changed the national anthem? Or 1982, when we changed the Constitution? Or . . . well, pick a year since then when they *haven't* wanted to change the Constitution. In Canada, every national symbol is permanently up for grabs.

At the Jacques Cartier pier, there were reminders of that older nation. The new citizens took their oath of allegiance to "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, her lawful heirs and successors";

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and, as the lieutenant governor, Quebec's viceroy, departed, the band of the Royal Canadian Artillery played the Royal Salute —the first half of "God Save the Queen" followed by the last half of "O Canada." But they were drowned in the surrounding sea of taxpayer-funded fatuity. A formation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was there, but they now come accompanied by a man in a big fat bear suit. Wedged into Mountie uniform, he waddles about bumping into his comrades. I've always understood that, in the Walt Disney Company's California and Florida back yards, the local police tend to be (how shall we put this?) *sympathetic* to the company's needs, but only in Canada does Disney *literally* own a police force: they now have exclusive worldwide marketing rights to the RCMP. It would be nice to think the dancing bear was a sign of Disneyfication, but like so much else this particular indignity is self-inflicted.

And then there was the cake. As the citizenship ceremony proceeded, the already thin crowd had gradually been draining away to stand in line for a free slice of "Canada's birthday cake." The federal government has taken to heart Marie Antoinette's injunction to "Let them eat cake." They shall eat all the cake they want: being Canadian is all about your right to free health care and free cake, not your responsibility to stand while your fellow citizens are being sworn in.

Pace Mme. Robillard, Canada is not a young country, but it is an immature one. And, with its history obliterated, its symbols trivialized, and its government myth-making descending deeper into banality, there is a horrible deadness about supposed national celebrations like Canada Day. This year's election produced little more than a Parliament of different regional parties—a few barely revived Tories in the Maritimes, then the separatist Bloc Québecois, the Liberals in Ontario, and the Reform Party in the West. But, insofar as it means anything, it's evidence of an increasing impatience with the national fictions of the last thirty years. Canada is "bilingual" only in the sense that I'm bisexual: that's to say, I live with a person of the opposite sex; her sexual preference is for men, mine is for women; collectively, we are sexually attracted both to men and women; therefore, ours is a bisexual household. A country that defines itself by demanding nothing of its citizens soon finds that those citizens can't even be bothered stringing along with the national fictions: like those Ontario brassieres, the discreet federal fig leaves are gradually being cast aside. "Canada is not a real country," Quebec's premier, Lucien Bouchard, has said. And, honestly, after "Smile Everyone, It's Canada Day" and ursine Mounties, it's hard to disagree.

Nonetheless, the Quebec government is forced to go to an inordinate amount of trouble to prove what ought to be self-evident. The week before Canada Day, the Office de la Langue Française dropped in on Dave Amsel's video-game boutique in St. Laurent to check whether he was complying with "Francisation" requirements. All went well and at the end Mr. Amsel, as a courtesy, gave the OLF inspector his business card. Unfortunately, he gave him an English-language business card, apparently unaware that, under Bill 101, it's illegal to offer anyone an English-language card unless he or she specifically requests it. Actually, given that most business cards are just names and numbers, language hardly enters into it, but Mr. Amsel had made the mistake of giving his address as "Decarie Blvd." instead of "Boul Decarie." Consequently, he found himself facing a fifteen-hundred-dollar fine.

Then there was the recent complaint to the OLF by an angry pet-shop customer who'd bought a parrot, taken it home, and been outraged to discover that it spoke only English. The Quebec government briefly considered demanding the recall of all parrots in the province. Incidentally, no one seems to know the present whereabouts of the bird—though doubtless, in time, he'll emerge from the Government Rehabilitation Facility, with a glassy look in his eyes

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and squawking, "Qui est un garçon joli, hein?"

To most English Canadians, this is all the work of an embittered minority crippled by a historical chip on one shoulder and an Anglophone parrot on the other. How else to explain the language police's chastisement of a Montreal grocer? His store, they said, had an English sign: "National." "National" in French is, of course, "*National*." But, as it was part of a pan-Canadian chain, the tongue troopers took the view that clearly the implicit, underlying intent of the sign was English. Reeling under the barrage, what's left of Quebec's Anglophone minority is rapidly descending into paranoia. A few months back, CJAD, the province's leading English-language radio station, led its morning bulletins with the news that, under a new law, all English gravestones would have to be replaced by ones in French only; in a personal commentary, the news director said that Anglophones should try to look on the bright side—it would be good for the economy, especially stonemasons, granite quarries, etc. This is the only April Fools' story I've ever enjoyed—not just because of its near-plausibility but because of its impact on the audience: they stormed into work determined to quit and move to Toronto; they broke down sobbing, "My God, they won't even let us alone in the grave!"; and, when the significance of the date finally struck them, they besieged the radio station with furious calls declaring they'd never listen ever again. In their way, the Anglos are more obsessed than the separatist government. Last year, a humorless Anglophone businessman, Howard Galganov, irked by laws requiring English commercial signs to be half the size of French ones, opened a store whose only purpose was to display English and French signs of equal size and thereby invite a prosecution which would expose the government to international ridicule. Instead, the OLF gave a laconic shrug and settled down to enjoy the sight of Mr. Galganov hemorrhaging money on his store week in, week out. In June, he threw in the towel and announced he was moving to Southern Ontario. Perhaps he knows something we don't: if legalized toplessness comes to Quebec, perhaps the separatists are planning a law requiring all English breasts to be at least half the size of French ones. Or perhaps, like so many Canadians, his heart's not in the struggle. Free cake isn't enough.

Personally, I find myself increasingly sympathetic to Québecois nationalism. "I feel like a foreigner in my own country," sputtered the province's minister of culture, Louise Beaudoin, citing the Outremont branch of Blockbuster Video. "I mean, that's not very Québecois, is it?" No, but it's not very Canadian either—and that's the point: why should Quebeckers trust Ottawa to defend French-Canadian culture when they've proved so unwilling to defend English-Canadian culture? In the end, language is destiny—and the irony, for those who speak the language of the masters, is that they're most vulnerable to the homogenized gibberish of international culture: just about the only English signs you see in downtown Montreal these days advertise "Non-Stop Sexie Topless"—the universal language, but not exactly the Queen's English. Language is Quebec's trump card: as Francophone culture has prospered, the rest of Canada has dwindled into a kind of multiple-imitation country—a particularly sloppy compilation album full of little bits that don't quite add up to anything in their own right. No wonder identity is the ritual obsession of English-Canadian culture. The most successful example in recent years, *The English Patient*, by Sri Lankan-Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje, is very thoughtful on the subject of lost identity. Which is just as well, because, shortly after, it lost its own: as the ostensibly British film version swept the Oscars, the cover of the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* demanded, "How Did *Our* Novel Become *Their* Movie?"

In the same way that *our* country became everybody's—and nobody's. Canada was more secure in its culture when its stories

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were really about red plaid shirts and bear country, before our "young nation" acquired its new anthems and constitutions and flags and citizenship. If the object of these changes was to endear Quebec to Canada, it's been a conspicuous failure: Francophones were surlily tolerant of the old Red Ensign and "God Save the Queen"; they're openly contemptuous of the Maple Leaf and "O Canada." Canadians see it as "the Quebec problem"; Quebec sees it as "the Canadian problem"—and, on balance, they're right. In July, a Reform Party strategist laid out, in the event of a Quebec secession, a plan for an independent British Columbia using as its currency the U.S. dollar.

The heart of the difference between Quebec nationalists and Canada's ersatz nationalists is summed up by the motto introduced to the province's license plates by the Parti Québecois twenty years ago: "Je Me Souviens." Collective, shared memory is essential to any healthy society. But, in the rest of Canada, ils les souviennent . . . rien.

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"The consecration of the heart": Ronald Knox reconsidered

by Paul Dean

Only two people have had the good fortune to have their biographies written by Evelyn Waugh, and they were both Catholic priests. One was Saint Edmund Campion, the sixteenth-century Jesuit. The other was Ronald Knox (1888–1957)—and who was he? Forty years after Knox's death, Waugh's biography of 1959 is out of print, known to few, and has had only one substantial supplement, Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Knox Brothers* (1977). Is there any case for a new biography, and what would such a book add to its predecessors?[1]

In 1945 Knox preached a sermon to commemorate the centenary of the conversion of John Henry Newman (whose life overlapped with his by two years). In the course of it, he said:

> The kind of fame and of opportunity which Newman had when he was an Anglican were of a more enjoyable sort than the fame and opportunity he enjoyed when he was a Catholic; and he must have foreseen it. To be part of a movement, of a growing and a winning movement; to see, in all your personal contacts, in all your literary projects, an opening for spreading the influence of that movement; to dominate, in large part, by force of intellect the intellectual world around you—I do not know that any kind of publicity can be so sweet to a man's vanity as the kind of publicity Newman had before 1838.[2]

Or, he might have added, as the kind of publicity *he* enjoyed before 1917, the year of his own conversion. A few years earlier, one of his fellow Anglican clergymen had declared, "Ronnie Knox *is* the Church of England!" How had he achieved such a position, and why did he renounce it?

Knox was born into an Evangelical Church of England family with missionary antecedents. He was the youngest of six children, all prodigiously gifted. His father, to whom he was very close and who was deeply grieved by what he could only see as Ronald's desertion to Rome, became bishop of Manchester and died in 1937 at the age of

1 I am greatly indebted to Knox's literary executor, the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, who welcomed me to Mells, gave me access to the papers in his possession, and granted me a lengthy interview. Mr. Auberon Waugh kindly gave me permission to use material falling within the Waugh copyright. I also profited from Milton T. Walsh's doctoral thesis *Ronald Knox as Apologist* (Gregorian University, Rome, 1985) and his essay in *Priests and People* 2, no. 10 (1988), a special number to mark the centenary of Knox's birth. A full bibliography of Knox's works, which remains unpublished and supplements the rather sketchy list given by Waugh, can also be found at Mells.

2 See *The Occasional Sermons of Ronald A. Knox*, edited by Philip Caraman, S.J. (1960). Fr. Caraman also edited two other volumes of Knox's sermons, but many are still unpublished.

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eighty-nine.[3] His mother died when he was three years old, and he was seven before his father remarried; in the interval he was largely brought up by an uncle and some fearsome maiden aunts. In 1900 he went to Eton, which was an emotionally central experience. His academic brilliance was seemingly effortless and he had the gift of attracting friends, but a curious reserve remained, the kind of shyness that masks, not frigidity, but an excessive capacity for emotion. At the age of seventeen, he took a vow of celibacy, prompted, Waugh suggests, by an ambivalent affection for a younger boy. His spirituality began to lean toward the Catholic party in the Church of England, a party to which his father was implacably opposed.

At Oxford he easily took a First and was offered a fellowship at Trinity before he had even finished his final examinations. We hear much of social engagements and friendships during this period, but gain few glimpses into his inner life. Waugh perhaps too readily dismisses his fragmentary diary; there are some tantalizing references to someone called Alan—Knox not only records when they met (adding once, with telling vagueness, "things quite happy") but also, unnecessarily for a factual record, when they did not ("I have not spoken to Alan since Monday," "Haven't seen Alan"). However, the diary stops abruptly with the heading "Friday June 14 [1907]," and we hear no more. In 1910 Knox acted as private tutor to the sixteen-year-old Harold Macmillan (who was prime minister when Waugh's biography appeared and is there disguised as "C"), and ran into trouble with Mrs. Macmillan for attempting, as she thought, to make her son a Catholic.

As chaplain of Trinity from 1911 (a post he held without any formal theological training!), he also had to teach undergraduates Virgil, Homer, and elementary logic. His lectures, which survive in typescript, have a wit, elegance, and clarity which must surely have been unusual even then (and would be barely possible now). He mocked the disintegrators of the classical texts as he would mock their counterparts in Biblical exegesis; applying their methods to F. W. Farrar's vacuous, but once hugely popular, school story, *Eric, or Little by Little*, he had no difficulty in proving it was of composite authorship, traceable to a primitive "Eric-Saga."

But he also became a national figure as a leader of the Anglo-Catholics. Waugh judges that he insulated himself from reality to a certain extent during this period, "in a hallowed world of his own," seeing himself and those who thought like him as the "real" Church of England and shirking the logical flaws in his position. Fr. C. C. Martindale wrote to Waugh, after Knox's death, that he felt Knox's Anglicanism had been "rather a 'game,'" and this does not seem an unfair judgment. There is an element of mischievous provocation in his ecclesiastical politicking and his antimodernist satires, though there is genuine intellectual edge, too, in his critique *Some Loose Stones* (1913), a title tilting at that of the book to which it was a reply, *Foundations*. The chapter "Authority and Experience" in *Some Loose Stones* rejects unequivocally the subjective, experiential element in religion as a basis for faith: "You cannot establish the truth of religion by appealing to the validity of an experience which you only declare valid on the assumption that religion is true." When he wrote those words, Knox believed that individual experience required authentication by appeal to a divinely founded institution: the Anglican church was a sufficient guarantor for the truth of Christianity. Once that belief had evaporated, he saw his choice not as between denominations, not as between Canterbury or Rome, but as between Christianity or atheism.

Other foundations, however, were about to have their fragility cruelly revealed. "History," Knox later wrote, "begins in 1914."

3 Bishop Knox rarely emerges with sufficient credit from accounts of his son's life. His own autobiography, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian 1847–1934* (1935), reflects a keen intelligence and a warm heart, even when he is at his most obdurate.

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The First World War claimed many of his friends and pupils, among them Guy Lawrence, a shadowy figure who was the object of what Waugh calls "the strongest human affection of Ronald's early manhood." He had become a Catholic before leaving for the front, a move which left Knox desolate, and Lawrence was not the only convert among his circle. (Macmillan postponed his decision, and in fact remained an Anglican to his dying day.) Knox felt he could not dissuade his protégés from taking a step that allowed them to face the prospect of death freed from unnecessary anxiety about their eternal salvation; and the starkness of the choice seems to have brought his own difficulties to the fore. An anguished memorandum records the pros and cons of submitting to Rome: it ends with the quotation "Vade retro Satanas," "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16:23). Knox would have been well aware that these words of Jesus are spoken to Peter, the first pope: there is still a glimmer of wit beneath the anguish.

With Oxford almost deserted, Knox spent two years schoolmastering at Shrewsbury, steeling himself against doubts about whether he was doing something real in celebrating the Eucharist, and moving in spiritual darkness. Eventually, on September 22, 1917, he was received into the Catholic Church. "He went where he belonged," he was to say of Newman in the sermon quoted earlier. "That is all the convert asks; all that the convert *can* ask with safety."

Knox's life as a Catholic priest (from 1919, after resigning his post at Trinity, he worked in the War Office until the Armistice) is atypical and in some respects colorless. As Waugh well says, "He became a Catholic in violation of all his tastes and human sympathies." One has the impression that his character changed dramatically, that he became a drab and gauche person out of distrust of the exhibitionism, the extrovert confidence, tinged with arrogance, of his Anglican self. Ambition was dead: he was under obedience now. The Church was in some ways extremely accommodating—Knox never held the cure of souls in an ordinary parish, with all the drudgery that entails. However, he rarely had the richness of human contact, spiritual nourishment, and enlargement of vision which such work can also bring. He lived initially in the Brompton Oratory in London, then from 1919 to 1926 he taught at St. Edmund's, a seminary-cum-school in Hertfordshire.

It seems to be agreed that he was rather wasted in this post, although he was an endearing schoolmaster and preserved to the end something of the idiom of the masters' common room; he once memorably referred to the writing of speculative theological works, likely to cause annoyance at Rome, as "cheeking the Head." From 1926 to 1939, he was chaplain to the Catholic undergraduates at Oxford. He was not directly concerned with their academic work, although he exhorted them not to slack; he was there to remind them of their duties to the faith, to instruct them in its fundamental tenets, and to warn against moral lapses.

It does not sound exciting, but Knox was a representative of an earlier Oxford generation, by common consent one of the most brilliant, and he knew what real culture was; so when he deplored "the kind of washy culture which modern journalism loves to proclaim . . . atheism with a sort of sediment of Protestantism about it," he spoke with authority. Fr. Milton T. Walsh, the American priest and scholar whose writing on Knox is particularly valuable, rightly points to "his formation in a culture where literature and religion shared a common grammar." His homilies ("conferences") at Sunday Mass, selections of which were reprinted in two volumes—*In Soft Garments* (1942) and *The Hidden Stream* (1952)—show the fruits of that upbringing, the ability to conduct a complex argument with grace, the carefully reined-in precision of phrasing that can rise, when required, to a moving ardor:

> Our intellects stammer and boggle when they try to reach the truth about Divine things, not

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> because the other world is a reflection of ours, but because ours is a reflection, and how pale a reflection, of the other. . . . The things we see and touch are only the shadows cast by eternal truth. What marvel if we, to whom shadow is substance, cannot raise our minds to contemplate the substance by which the shadow is cast?

When Knox left Oxford he was invited to take up residence with Lord and Lady Acton, at Aldenham, Shropshire, where he would have the peace and quiet to fulfill a commission from the hierarchy to make a new translation of the Bible: but the outbreak of war brought a girls' convent school to Aldenham as evacuees, and he became their chaplain also, preaching to entranced young audiences his most brilliant sermons: *The Mass in Slow Motion* (1948), *The Creed in Slow Motion* (1949), *The Gospel in Slow Motion* (1950). It is impossible not to admire the art by which he adapted his teaching ministry to this congregation, of a kind so wholly outside his experience up to that time, or to doubt that they loved him. In his last illness, he wrote to some of them with whom he had kept in touch. "If you are going to die," one wrote back, "I don't want anyone else to live." The raw pain of such a reaction says everything about what this shy man had meant to those little girls.

In Lady Acton, too (whom he prepared for reception into the Catholic Church), he found a confidante and friend of rare quality. Waugh says frankly that Knox felt troubled enough about his feelings for her to consult "the most severe monk of his acquaintance." This was Dom Hubert van Zeller, who later wrote to Waugh that he had counseled them both to be "less intellectual . . . not to find reasons for everything but to pray more and act upon the resulting attraction . . . to take themselves as they were before God—without fooling themselves or rationalising everything." Remarkable and wise advice! Waugh expressed the hope that their correspondence might one day be published; it remains in the possession of the Acton family.

In 1947, when the Actons emigrated to Southern Rhodesia, Knox moved to the Manor House at Mells, Somerset, the home of the Earl of Oxford and Asquith and his family, who were old friends of Knox. He said his daily Mass in the chapel in their garden, which was used for public worship on Sundays. He remained in constant demand as a preacher, and maintained a vast correspondence with the many strangers who wrote to him seeking spiritual advice, which was never solicited in vain. The house provided a sanctum in which he finished—single-handed, with none of the research assistants or public endowments which would nowadays be assumed to be essential—the translation of the Bible, which he followed up with a commentary on the New Testament. He always disclaimed for himself the description of theologian, and Penelope Fitzgerald records his brothers' cheerfully crushing reactions to the news of the translation. Dillwyn (a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and War Office cryptographer) remarked, "A bad text, and he doesn't know very much Greek," to which Wilfred (an Anglican priest) added, "Or theology—except what I've taught him." There were endless difficulties over the translation, which was never accepted in some episcopal quarters because of its attempt to use a modern idiom, and which, it must be confessed, has not worn well, although Knox's discussions of his procedure collected in *On Englishing the Bible* (1949), and his Romanes lecture "On English Translation," yield fascinating insights into this most elusive of intellectual processes.

One further major book, forty years in the making, appeared in 1950. *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion, with Special Reference to the XVII and XVIII Centuries* is a study of aberrant mysticism and evangelical revival which has lost none of its topicality. (I hope to be forgiven for quoting the aphorism that America is "the last refuge of the enthusiast"!) As Waugh says, its quality is uneven, as usually happens with a work that has gone cold on its author. But the one hundred and twenty

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pages devoted to John Wesley, founder of Methodism, are the most masterly sustained piece of writing in all Knox's works.

He is at once fascinated and repelled by Wesley, whom he more than once likens to Newman, and we can feel him measuring himself against both of them at the same time. Although "quite destitute of insight into the realities of human nature," a "complete Philistine," a spiritual Gradgrind (and, on occasion, a spiritual Bounderby, too), exercising dictatorial rule over "a theocracy of the *petite bourgeoisie*," Wesley emerges as a man of exceptional courage, unshakable conviction, even tragic greatness—Knox compares him in old age to King Lear. Wesley's triumphalism about the mass hysteria which often punctuated his sermons, the faintings, exorcisms, and glossolalia, fills Knox with distaste, yet he can see that English Christianity became, through the infiltration of Methodism into its mainstream, more of a religion of experience, impervious to logic or reason where these seemed to slight the authenticity of inner illumination, and therefore peculiarly vulnerable.

The self can never, for Knox, be the source of authority. It had been a contentious point between him and his father, whose religion owed much to the traditions of Wesleyan revival, and who maintained to the end that his son had been required to surrender his freedom and stoop beneath the Roman yoke. Kevin L. Morris makes an acute remark when he calls Knox's struggle to be charitable to Wesley in *Enthusiasm* "an act of expiation, of filial *rapprochement* with his father." [4] How did Knox finally regard his former spiritual home, the Church of England? There is something a little overinsistent in his use of "Protestant" as a pejorative term, which falls ungenerously on post-Vatican II ears; and when the Anglican Report on Doctrine (issued by a commission which numbered his brother Wilfred among its advisers) appeared in 1938 his response was flatly dismissive: he described as "ominous" the commission's "refusal to contemplate the idea of mystery" and concluded, "There is nothing to be prayed for except a revolution in their whole method of thought."

Yet one is struck by the acuteness of his diagnosis in a centenary article on "Anglicanism Since 1850" (*The Tablet*, September 23, 1950). What would have happened, he asks, if the Tractarian movement had seized control of the Church of England? It would now be disestablished, and relatively orthodox. The archbishops of Canterbury and York had reacted to the recently promulgated Dogma of the Assumption by stating that they did not regard it as essential to the faith of the Church of England. This, Knox retorts, "only set us wondering what doctrines the Church of England does regard as essential to the faith. A Tractarian Church of England could have told us." But what if liberalism had won the day?, he next asks, and replies:

> There would, no doubt, have been a Tractarian *petite église*, after the fashion of the Nonjuring Schism, which might or might not have found its way into the bosom of the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, Anglicanism would be much in the position of the Scandinavian Churches, a quiet pool of Erastian modernism, disturbed at intervals by ripples of Evangelical revival. For supernatural guidance we should go to such an institution in vain; it would have neither a tradition nor a recognizable torso of Scripture to inspire its utterances, and it would have accommodated itself thoroughly by now to easy divorce.

Perhaps Knox would have been taken aback by the exactness with which his hypothesis has become reality in the Church of England in the last forty years. His horror at such a prospect might have been one of the few opinions he could have shared with his father.

But, of course, the Roman Catholic Church itself has seen upheavals unimag-

4 See *Mgr Ronald Knox: A Great Teacher* (Catholic Truth Society, 1995)—the best comment in an otherwise superficial pamphlet.

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inable in Knox's day. Dom Hubert van Zeller, interviewed by Milton Walsh in 1983, said, "I think if [Knox] had lived today it would have broken his heart"; and Lord Oxford, in the interview he kindly gave me, expressed the view that Knox would have been particularly uncomfortable with a vernacular liturgy, although he set such store by obedience that he would have schooled himself into accepting this and other developments; he would have been an admirer of the present pope and would have had no truck with secessionists such as Archbishop Lefebvre.

Although some aspects of his Catholicism (not the doctrine, but its outward formulations and expressions) are now outmoded, and it may well seem that modern Catholicism has little to learn from Knox, I believe this view to be mistaken. Quite a few of his books, as far as I know, are out of print, and there are many which have not even been mentioned here: but there is surely room for a Knox Reader, an anthology of representative extracts. Thought and writing of such lucidity and elegance are not so common that we can be content to be deprived of them. Any future biographer, also, will surely wish to set Knox's life and work in the broader context of the history of twentieth-century Catholicism, and to give more consideration to the development of his thought than Evelyn Waugh felt inclined to. The book on apologetics, which he left barely begun at his death, forecasts an adventurous new start. He had earlier, in a retreat for ordinands (from which the phrase in my title, "the consecration of the heart," is taken), regretted the fact that there was often "too much of the drill-sergeant" in priests' dealings with people: here he goes so far as to call conventional apologetics "inhuman" in its Aristotelian mechanisms, and, in the fragmentary dialogue which follows, Dr. Varden, the scholastic, is mercilessly guyed.[5] As often, Milton Walsh is the best commentator; he sees Knox's perspective as widening out, in these last stages, to make more room for imagination (a faculty condemned officially as tainted by modernism at the time of Knox's conversion), so that his earlier forensic manner, slightly frigid in its clarity, softened as he admitted the need to move the heart as well as the head—or rather, as he himself achieved a greater integration of the two ("Our Lord Jesus Christ was perfectly simple," Knox said in the retreat for ordinands, "because he was perfectly integrated").

What had brought about this greater depth we cannot say. Knox's was a loving nature, but he was as suspicious of emotion as he was susceptible to it. His spiritual life is largely hidden from us, glimpsed only in two talks to undergraduates on prayer (printed in *The Clergy Review* in 1939), which include the admission, "in the great bulk of my prayers, vocal and mental, all my life, I have not felt as if I was talking to God in His presence, but rather apostrophizing Him in His absence"; and among the aphorisms he jotted down in a notebook are "Is it true that as you get older God gets greater and more distant?" and "God most rewards us when he most eludes us." Fr. Martindale wrote to Evelyn Waugh, "I think he was rather sad at times: he told a friend of mine that he'd never got any joy out of religion." This, if accurately reported, must have been the utterance of a desperate moment; it would be cruel to take it as a final verdict on Knox's spiritual life. Yet he kept his own counsel, and few adults, Lady Acton excepted, had known his heart since Guy Lawrence died.

In 1956 Knox was diagnosed as having cancer. He managed an emotional farewell appearance at Oxford to deliver his Romanes lecture; then he retired to Mells to prepare for death. The letters he wrote, and received, about this make touching reading. The type of cancer he had involved no great

5 All that Knox left of this projected book was printed in *The Month* in 1959, and separately the same year as *Proving God*. Knox was always attracted to the literary dialogue; one of his best "secular" books, *Let Dons Delight* (1939), was cast in that form.

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suffering, he assured one correspondent: "I expect I'm not worthy of it." The self-deprecating irony remained, even then; to one of his old convent girls he wrote: "I am to have an operation on my : but they tell me you can manage very well with a ; ." It was at Mells that he died, relatively peacefully, in 1957, and here, in the shadow of the sixteenth-century Anglican church in what is still one of the loveliest villages in England, he lies buried. Evelyn Waugh composed the inscription on the tombstone, concluding it with a Biblical quotation pointing to the foundations of Knox's reclusive nature: "You are dead and your life is hidden in Christ with God" (Colossians 3:3). To apply to Knox one last time some words he used in preaching on Newman, one might say he was "a man who lived haunted by the truth, and died desiring it."

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Two poems by Charles Baudelaire

translated & with an introduction by Louis Simpson

In 1852, the March and April issues of *La Revue de Paris* carried an essay by Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), "Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Works." This was the first version of Baudelaire's preface to his influential translation of Poe's tales. In Poe's view, poets possessed "the immortal instinct for the beautiful which makes us consider the earth and its spectacles as a revelation, as in correspondence with Heaven." Above all, poetry must be constructed; it was not a naïve outpouring: "construction, armature, so to speak, is the most important guarantee of the mysterious life of works of the mind." Poe's "correspondence" of earth and heaven would be the Symbolism of the movement that appeared in the 1880s, and his insistence on the "music" of poetry was equally important to the Symbolists—the rhythms and sounds of their poems were intended to create a mood. Poets would "construct" their works as Poe said they must, aiming at perfection.

When Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* went on sale on June 25, 1857, an article in *Le Figaro* attacked it for its "immorality." The public prosecutor began legal proceedings against Baudelaire and his editors for "outraging public morality." Baudelaire was fined three hundred francs, later reduced to fifty. (Flaubert, too, had been prosecuted for outraging public morality, with his novel *Madame Bovary*, but was acquitted.) Sick and discouraged, Baudelaire planned to leave Paris. The charge that the poems encouraged immorality is ironic in view of their stated intention to rise above morality, good or bad. For Baudelaire, art must be disconnected from the passions: in one of his poems Beauty says, "Never do I weep, and never laugh." He seems to be writing with the positivist philosophy of the age. In his descriptions of the modern city, Baudelaire is objective, impersonal, appalling.

But he is not a "realist" of the kind associated with Edmond Duranty, Champfleury, and their school of Realism that gave trivial accounts of everyday life. At one time, Baudelaire contemplated writing an essay in which he would give reasons for disassociating himself from the school. Baudelaire's writing can be realistic in that his descriptions are accurate, but the objects and actions he shows are significant. At times, they seem symbolic. The view opens and lifts to sweep across space and time.

There are poems in which Baudelaire is not at all impersonal. He speaks to angels and demons, to a vampire. He speaks of using opium, and of his "spleen," times "When the sky, low and heavy, weighs like a lid/ On the groaning spirit, prey to long ennuis . . ." This is the Baudelaire who would be aped toward the end of the century by the so-called Decadents. The greatness of Baudelaire, however, is not in passages that express his ennuis. It is in poetry such as "The Swan." Is the poem realism? Symbolism? The writing breaks strikingly through the limits of such terms.

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Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
—Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

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Correspondences

Nature is a temple. The columns are
Alive and sometimes vaguely seem to talk;
There are symbols in the forests where we walk
That watch us, and they seem familiar.

As echoes in the distance come together
Mysteriously and merge and sound as one,
Vast as night and shining like the dawn,
Perfumes, colors, sounds speak to each other.

There are perfumes fresh as the flesh of an infant,
As soft as oboes, green as a prairie,
—And others corrupt, rich, and triumphant,

Expanding as things do in infinity,
Like amber, musk, benjamin, and incense,
Singing the ecstasies of spirit and sense.

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Le cygne

à Victor Hugo

I

Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,
Ce Simoïs menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,

A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.
Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel);

Je ne vois qu'en esprit tout ce camp de baraques,
Ces tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts,
Les herbes, les gros blocs verdis par l'eau des flaques,
Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus.

Là s'étalait jadis une ménagerie;
Là je vis, un matin, à l'heure où sous les cieux
Froids et clairs le Travail s'éveille, où la voirie
Pousse un sombre ouragan dans l'air silencieux,

Un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage,
Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,
Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage.
Près d'un ruisseau sans eau la bête ouvrant le bec

Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre,
Et disait, le coeur plein de son beau lac natal:
"Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?"
Je vois ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal,

Vers le ciel quelquefois, comme l'homme d'Ovide,
Vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu,
Sur son cou convulsif tendant sa tête avide,
Comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu!

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The swan

to Victor Hugo

I

Andromache, I think of you. The Simois,
Little river that once shone with reflections
Of the majesty of your widow's sorrow,
Great with your tears, that now sadly runs,

Brought back to life my fertile memory
As I was crossing the new Carrousel.
Old Paris is no more (the heart of a city
Changes sooner, alas, than the heart of a mortal);

In my mind's eye only, I see barracks,
Rough-hewn capitals and columns, grass,
Blocks turning green in puddles, bric-a-brac
Scattered in windows, shining behind the glass.

There was a display, a menagerie,
And once I saw there, at the time of day
When Labor wakes under a clear, cold sky
And a dust storm rises from the highway,

A swan that somehow had escaped its cage,
Scraping webbed feet on the stony walk,
Over rough ground dragging its white plumage,
Near a dry stream bed opening its beak,

Bathe its wings in the dust. And with a heart
Full of its beautiful native lake, it said,
"Water, when will you rain? Thunder, when will you start?"
I see the unhappy one, so strangely fated,

Toward the sky, like the man in Ovid,
Toward the cruelly blue, ironic sky,
On its convulsive neck stretch its avid head,
As though it were reproaching the Deity!

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II

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs vent plus lourds que des rocs.

Aussi devant ce Louvre une image m'opprime:
Je pense à mon grand cygne, avec ses gestes fous,
Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime,
Et rongé d'un désir sans trêve! et puis à vous,

Andromaque, des bras d'un grand époux tombée,
Vil bétail, sous la main du superbe Pyrrhus,
Auprès d'un tombeau vide en extase courbée;
Veuve d'Hector, hélas! et femme d'Hélénus!

Je pense à la négresse, amaigrie et phtisique,
Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard;

A quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve
Jamais, jamais! à ceux qui s'abreuvent de pleurs
Et tètent la Douleur comme une bonne louve!
Aux maigres orphelins séchant comme des fleurs!

Ainsi dans la forêt où mon esprit s'exile
Un vieux Souvenir sonne à plein souffle du cor!
Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île,
Aux captifs, aux vaincus! . . . à bien d'autres encor!

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II

Paris changes! But none of my melancholy
Has budged. New palaces, scaffolds, blocks
Old suburbs . . . all becomes an allegory.
My memories are heavier than the rocks.

Standing before the Louvre, I feel the weight
Of an image, my big swan, with his insane
Gestures, like exiles, ridiculous but great,
Gnawed by unappeasable desire. And then,

Andromache, you, from your hero's embrace
Torn like cattle, under the hand of Pyrrhus,
Kneeling by a tomb, praying to empty space;
Widow of Hector, wife of Helenus!

I think of the negress, gaunt, tubercular,
Trudging in the mud, and looking around her
With haggard eyes for the palms of Africa
Behind the huge wall of fog that surrounds her;

Of those who have lost what can never again
Be found. Never! Who water Grief with tears
And like a good she-wolf suckle their pain;
I think of orphans shriveling like flowers.

In the forest where my spirit lives in exile
Memory sounds again . . . *le son du Cor!*
I think of sailors deserted on an isle,
Of captives, the vanquished . . . and many more!

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Art

David Smith at Storm King

by Karen Wilkin

Visitors to "The Fields of David Smith" at the Storm King Art Center are likely to come away feeling confused and enlightened—confused because Smith will seem as elusive as ever and enlightened because they will have gained a truer understanding of the enigmatic, apparently inexhaustible work of this extraordinary artist.[1] The show is neither tidy nor designed to help viewers pigeonhole Smith, but that is exactly why it *does* deepen our sense of what he was about. Instead of a neatly organized sequence, a wide-ranging assortment of Smith's sculptures, both large and small, in a variety of media, has been installed throughout Storm King's indoor exhibition spaces and extending to the generous adjacent lawns. There are muscular, chunky works and slender, linear ones; dense, intricately constructed pieces and others pared down to essentials; brooding, richly allusive sculptures and playful, seemingly straightforward ones. And more.

Outdoors, against the green hills of the Hudson Valley, about two dozen large pieces, some rarely exhibited, some from Storm King's own holdings of Smith's work, are given ample space, yet grouped so that no sculpture is wholly isolated from the others. Inside, smaller works are installed with related and sometimes not so related drawings and spray paintings. From the interior of the elegant house that serves as Storm King's gallery, we can look out the windows to the outdoor portion of the show, so that connections between works in different scales and different media become visible. All this is given a frame of reference by photographs of the sculpture-filled fields of Smith's property at Bolton Landing, north of the village of Lake George, most by Alexander Liberman and Dan Budnik, with additional photos by Smith's neighbor Harry Gitlin, and Smith himself. Two videos enlarge the context, one made in conjunction with the Smith retrospective in 1982 at the National Gallery, Washington, the other made by the Italian television network RAI during the renowned international outdoor exhibition, "Sculpture in the City," held as part of the 1962 Spoleto Festival dei Due Mondi.

Initially, the show seems a little shapeless, hard to follow. There are no neatly arranged, chronologically organized series of works, no easily discerned thematic progressions. At first sight, it seems that the only unifying principle is that most of the outdoor sculptures are insistently vertical, with the majority of them totemic and bodylike, or at least confrontational. Except

1 The first installment of "The Fields of David Smith," a three-part series of exhibitions of the sculptor's work, opened at the Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York, on May 19, 1997, and remains on view through November 16. The subsequent installments will be on view in the summer and fall of 1998 and the summer and fall of 1999.

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for some of Storm King's pieces from the mid and late 1950s, most are from the last five years of Smith's life. (He died, at fifty-nine, in an automobile accident in 1965.) Despite this emphasis on sculptures from the early 1960s, it is also apparent that the selection is by no means a complete overview of the artist's late work; there are none of the threatening weaponlike Zigs, none of the athletic Wagons, none of the boxy, space-greedy Cubis. Yet this apparently messy gathering of diverse works will give attentive viewers a more accurate idea of David Smith's methods and achievement than a more obviously comprehensive or logically arranged exhibition.

Storm King's show is not only faithful to the way this protean creator went about making his art, but faithful to the way he probably went about *looking* at his art. Without attempting to replicate the fields of Bolton Landing literally, the exhibition vividly recalls Smith's habitual practice of placing his large works in close rows in the fields of his farm, in order to contemplate them in changing conditions and in proximity to their fellows. It's not ideal, of course. Other exhibitions and parts of the permanent collection intrude. A huge, craggy monolith by Ursula von Rydingsvard glowers like a thundercloud behind the Smiths; an immense orange Alexander Calder pokes up from a lower field. But for the most part, the placement of Smith's sculptures on the Storm King lawns suggests, without imitating precisely, the way he arranged his works on his Adirondack property. And should we forget that this is not an effort to replicate "the fields of David Smith," the exhibition's numerous photographs of Bolton Landing, taken at different times of year, remind us of the difference between the real thing and Storm King's evocation.

Clearly, necessity and expedience played a role in how Smith disposed his pieces. He had a phenomenal appetite for work and produced an enormous amount, little of which was sold in his lifetime. The fields of Bolton Landing provided a ready solution to the problem of what to do with this vast body of work, but it is significant that Smith chose to store his sculptures where he could see them all the time. He lived surrounded by the large works in his fields, able to see them every day, to test them against each other and in relation to works still in the studio or set on the terrace of the sturdy "mouse proof" house that he built to replace the property's original farmhouse. For Smith, this extended period of looking and comparing was essential to the evolution of his work. It allowed him to discover the implications of individual sculptures and thus provided him with points of departure for the divergent paths he explored throughout his life as an artist. The installation at Storm King aims at giving visitors some sense of how Smith confronted his own works—impossible to achieve, of course, but you must admire the attempt. A good deal does come through, and, when you add the smaller works and drawings installed indoors, the full complexity of the sculptor's approach to making art begins to reveal itself.

Complexity is the operative word. Smith is generally thought to have been exclusively a sculptor in steel—certainly his reputation was deservedly established by his welded sculpture—yet he saw himself as an artist who could do anything, as someone who transformed whatever he put his hand to by the force of his individuality. He worked in many media throughout his life, making everything from jewelry to large-scale constructions to the pylons that carried electric power to his farmhouse, testing the potential of wood, stone, forged iron, cast bronze, discarded tools, machine parts, clay, and a host of more ephemeral materials. Even steel appears in forms ranging from industrial scrap to specially cut sheets of pristine stainless. While Smith may have earned his place in the pantheon of twentieth-century art as a sculptor in welded metal, he insisted that he "belonged with painters." He was a painter before he was a sculptor, and, even after he had determined

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that he was primarily a sculptor, he never abandoned painting. His desire to fuse the two disciplines in colored structures that would, in his words, "beat either one," is well known. What is more significant, Smith drew and painted prodigiously, and as well, made reliefs, throughout his working life, maintaining separate studios for different media: a factorylike sculpture atelier and a "clean" space for works on paper and canvas. Working in two dimensions was a way of resting and refreshing himself after the labor of making large-scale steel sculptures—and vice versa.

Today, Smith is celebrated as one of America's great sculptors—many of us are convinced that he is America's greatest sculptor and one of our greatest artists in any medium. No one would deny that his most inventive, powerful, and ambitious works were in three dimensions, but it is impossible to separate his sculpture completely from his work in other media, just as it is impossible to separate completely an individual sculpture from the entire trajectory of his career. The carefully numbered series names of his sculptures are misleading. Attention to Smith's scrupulously recorded dates reveals that he worked on many different types of sculptures at the same time, each a development of the diverse implications of its companions and precedents. (The only exceptions are the twenty-seven Voltris, made in a single, intense month-long campaign when Smith was invited to work in Italy in connection with the Spoleto exhibition.) The exhibition at Storm King, while not intended in any way as definitive, manages to give a convincing sense of the complex, intertwined relationships that link Smith's sculptures to one another and to his works in other media.

The more time we spend at the show, the more deliberate the casual-seeming selection becomes. The subtext underlines two of Smith's recurring preoccupations: the body and the world of nature. That a great many of Smith's most powerful sculptures are alert, vertical presences that ring changes on the proportions and postures of the human body is hardly news—he himself once declared that all his works were "girl sculptures." Even the most geometric and simplified of Smith's constructions, such as *Five Units Equal* (1956, Storm King Art Center), a stack of evenly spaced rectangular boxes separated by lengths of I-beam, is a hieratic, personable object that seems to look back at us, instead of passively submitting to our gaze. Often wrong-headedly discussed as a prototype of minimalism, *Five Units Equal*, for all its apparent geometric purity and symmetry, is in fact engagingly irregular. Like all of Smith's sculptures, it is brought to life by the presence of his hand, the memory of touch, in the form of subtle nudges out of true—here an animating backward cant, like a person rocking slightly on his heels.

The relation of Smith's sculpture to nature and the landscape is a less familiar topic, but it becomes a dominant theme at Storm King. That the show provokes interesting questions about this relationship is reason enough to rush to Mountainville at the first opportunity. No matter how familiar we are with Smith's works, our understanding of them is altered by seeing them not in a pristine gallery setting, but in the vast parklike grounds of the Center. Just how these apparently self-sufficient works are affected by their settings is an issue that needs addressing. As Peter Stevens, the sculptor who, along with one of Smith's daughters, administers the sculptor's estate, has pointed out, there was a reason (besides the obvious one of economy) why Smith chose to live where he did, and a reason (besides the obvious one of storage) why he chose to study his sculptures in rows against a background of densely wooded hills.

Certainly, as the Storm King installation makes plain, that experience informed Smith's work. Over the years, he made many landscape drawings and several landscape sculptures, one of which, *Landscape with Strata* (1946, Dr. and Mrs. Arthur E. Kahn), a marvelous, elusive structure that

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seems to slip away from us as we move around it, is included in the show. (Smith's best known sculpture dealing with the outdoors—*Hudson River Landscape* from 1951, now in the Whitney Museum of American Art—inexplicably, is not.) What an astonishing idea, a landscape sculpture! It defies the entire inherited tradition of the statue. It challenges the time-honored notion of sculpture as a carved or modeled figurative monolith. For sheer chutzpah it's right up there with Picasso's equally atraditional still-life sculptures—which, in fact, have antecedents in decorative carving that freestanding landscape sculptures do not.

Smith's early forays into this uncharted territory are like drawings of the landscape made in steel—they reduce a vast chunk of land, clouds, and sky to a manageable metaphorical object. Toward the end of his life, however, when he became increasingly interested in larger-scale work, he began to think about confronting nature on her own terms, at full size. That ambition may well have owed something to his experience of studying the rows of works he installed in the fields stretching away from his house, seeing them in changing light and weather, against backgrounds whose colors and textures varied with the time of day and with the seasons.

At Storm King, we can follow Smith's various responses to the self-imposed problem of addressing landscape themes without making miniaturized images of the natural world. Some of the pieces exhibited outdoors are like emphatic additions to their surroundings. The brilliantly polychromed *Rebecca Circle* (1961, Candida and Rebecca Smith) looms like a giant sunflower, a monstrous bloom that dwarfs the distant hills. The same dialogue continues more subtly in the twin sculptures, one the negative of the other, *2 Circle IV* (1962, Mr. and Mrs. David N. Pincus) and *2 Circles 2 Crows* (1963, Irma and Norman Braman), each made of a pair of flat discs framing angular radiating shapes, like stylized flying birds. Like *Rebecca Circle*, they stamp themselves out against the fields and trees, as though a flock of gargantuan crows were passing against the light. They are odd sculptures, atypically flat and papery, to the point of resembling cutout paintings. As is always true of even Smith's most apparently planar works, they are less flat and papery than they seem to be at first acquaintance, but the connection with painting is undoubtedly deliberate, since Smith frequently used his painter friends' work as a springboard for his own inventions. Helen Frankenthaler's radiant stain paintings have something to do with the flat, soft-edged shapes Smith deployed in some of his Voltri sculptures. A series of pared-down and crisply painted Circle sculptures are obvious comments on Kenneth Noland's brilliantly colored Circle paintings, while an expansive, black-painted sculpture with an eccentric profile was directly inspired by Robert Motherwell's *Elegy for the Spanish Republic* series. Motherwell's images, along with Adolph Gottlieb's explosive Bursts, inform the blunted spiky silhouettes of *2 Circles 2 Crows* and its mate, but there are also curious parallels with the oversized birds that preoccupied Georges Braque in the late 1950s and early 1960s. (Smith didn't count Braque among his friends, but he was certainly well aware of what the French master was doing.)

When they are seen out-of-doors, as they are at Storm King, it seems probable that Smith conceived some of his most declarative planar constructions, at least in part, to interrupt or punctuate the landscape, but it is also clear that he was not content simply to impose himself visually on nature. In other sculptures, he appears to have chosen to embrace particular portions of his surroundings by incorporating them bodily into his constructions. An austere circle on tall, parallel "legs," *Untitled* (1964, Newark Museum) is like an elevated frame for a landscape view. Like many of Smith's late works, the piece is made of stainless steel. He seems to have loved the permanence of stainless, perhaps even its intransigence, its obdurate hardness. Most of all, he seems to

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have valued its brilliant surface, its ability to reflect its setting and to take on the hues of its surroundings. It offered yet another way of getting color into sculpture, in the case of *Untitled* the transient hues of the natural world, paradoxically made integral with structure. At Storm King, the stainless sculptures both come alive and become disembodied. The gestural "drawing" with the grinder—which Smith used to enrich the works' surfaces—captures and shatters the light, turning rigid steel structures into ephemeral bursts of radiance.

Smith was deeply appreciative of the qualities of stainless steel, but it posed problems. He could weld stainless, but he lacked the special equipment required for cutting this extremely hard metal, so sculptures in stainless, or at least their component parts, had to be preconceived in a way contrary to his usual practice. While he assembled a stockpile of precut shapes that he used almost as freely as scrap metal, the entire process of working in stainless was necessarily less direct and spontaneous than working in other materials, less dependent on touch. Drawing on the surface of his stainless pieces with the grinder was not only a way of intensifying their light-diffusing properties, but also a way for Smith to get his hand back into the work, a substitute for more intimate manipulations crucial to his sculptures made of ordinary steel.

Stainless was permanent but expensive. A cheaper way of creating a resistant surface was to paint it. Smith habitually painted his sculptures, in part to protect them, and in part because of his long-standing wish to integrate color and structure. (He often used several different materials within a single work, not only because of the diverse forms they permitted, but because of their different colors and surfaces.) Some sculptures were painted a single hue; others received gestural, brushy surfaces of contrasting tones. Changes in color could unify and simplify disparate parts, or conversely, heighten the spatial complexity of uninflected planes; occasionally, as in the floating rectangle painted on a concave tank end, in the white and dark blue *Tanktotem VII* (1960, Storm King Art Center), Smith used painted shapes in counterpoint to real structural elements.

He preferred, he said, "kind of raw colors"—auto enamel was his paint of choice for outdoor works—and was reported to have said that his sculptures could be any color but white. But as any visitor to the Storm King show can attest, a considerable number of the exhibited sculptures *are* white, the state in which they were when Smith was killed. Which leads to a complicated issue. The short version—minus details about the private agendas of the participants—is that many of the white painted sculptures were stripped of their paint after Smith's death, at the request of the critic Clement Greenberg, a close friend and supporter of the artist's since the 1940s, a valued presence in his studio, and a trustee of his estate. (Smith's daughters were minors in 1965.) Greenberg insisted that the white paint was primer and that Smith never intended the sculptures to be seen in that state; besides, he said, it was the person who applied the primer, Smith's assistant, who had been asked to remove it. As well, Greenberg was on record as saying he preferred the unpainted works. The art historian Rosalind Krauss launched a major protest against the stripping. The Smith girls came of age, the trustees were dismissed, and decisions about the works in the estate came to be made by the present administrators. Among other things, they have arranged for restoration of the white paint—by a trained conservator, in a manner that, like all responsible interventions, can be reversed, if desired.

We'll never know what Smith intended. The best we can hope for is informed speculation. It's true that he eventually used color on many of his sculptures, but he also placed many white painted works in his fields and lived with them in that state for many years. Perhaps he was waiting to refine ideas about colors, but some sculptures were definitely meant to be white.

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One of them, a modestly scaled bent plane, pierced with generous circles and a square, dates from about 1955. Its formal kinship with some of the large-scale white sculptures at Storm King, signed and dated by the artist in 1962 and 1963, suggests that they, too, may have been in their final state when Smith died, a notion reinforced by the fact that he had allowed as many as four years to pass without altering their hues. In the end, the question is unanswerable, but seeing these works outdoors reminds us that painting a sculpture white is an inexpensive, simple way to create a surface extremely sensitive to nuances of light. Indoors, the white-painted sculptures seem inert, inarticulate; in daylight, they gain clarity and strength. Perhaps the strongest argument for white paint's being intended is made by the pair of "flying bird" sculptures. The "negative" version, with cutout birds, is polychrome, so that blue and yellow discs frame images cropped from the landscape itself. The positive version, which thriftily reuses the cutout shapes, is painted white, reversing our expectations, but paradoxically sharpening the impact of the crows—silhouetted against the distant views trapped by the surrounding ring—by bringing them forward, visually, thrusting them toward the viewer.

The opportunity for such eye-sharpening confrontations, in fact, is the real strength of the Storm King exhibition—and its real reason. If we pay attention, the underlying logic and ordering of the exhibition finally reveal themselves. In one of the indoor galleries, for example, we can find three versions of a small sculpture, like a crescent on a stick, brought together to emphasize the way Smith explored the permutations of an idea. The original piece, made in 1958–59 in steel and cast iron, is energetically brushed with "raw colors" that suggest that Smith had a good look at what de Kooning was up to in the late 1950s. Two bronze casts, made in 1959, seemingly replicate the form in a single, richer material, but we quickly realize that each version is unique; each, including the original, has added pieces that thrust into space in different ways. When we turn to the works hung on the walls, we realize that the drawings are of similar motifs and that the photographs of the fields include a tall, stacked white-painted sculpture like a monumental, more massive version of the little crescents on sticks. Through the window, we can see the work itself: the imposing, solemn *Lunar Arc* (1961, Candida and Rebecca Smith), a crisp cropped circle, rearing on a slender oval leg. Everything falls into place, at last.

Smith's work is endlessly rich. No matter how many times you see the same piece, you always find something new, something unexpected, something that clarifies both its individuality and its connections with his other works and drawings. But at the same time, the more you learn about Smith, the more multivalent and hard to categorize his art seems. Each encounter with his work makes him seem more fierce, more intelligent, and more passionate, but also more enigmatic. As I said, he is America's greatest sculptor and one of our greatest artists. Period. *The Fields of David Smith*, organized to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of Storm King's acquisition of thirteen works by the artist from his estate, is a fitting tribute. The project is billed as a three-year changing exhibition, so we have two more installments ahead of us. That's something to look forward to. But don't miss this year's version.

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Masterpieces & mishmash: "Objects of Desire" at MOMA

by Mario Naves

As a means of tracing the trajectory of twentieth-century art, the still life seems a useful guide. Historically, the still life was considered a lesser form of painting due to the mundane objects it depicted. How, after all, could an image of fruit, no matter how finely delineated, compare to the grandeur of history painting? While a hierarchy of genres may seem silly, if not incomprehensible, to a contemporary sensibility, it should not be forgotten that some of the most radical art of the modern era had, as its ostensible subject, the humble still life. The word "radical" is used here not as a gauge of an artist's political beliefs, but as a marker of how art can reconfigure itself, as well as the way we look at it and the world. At a time when radicalism in art is measured by the stridency of one's ideological "subject matter," it is important to bear in mind that a truly revolutionary art once took for its objective basis an eggplant.

Which is why Cézanne's *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants* (1890–94) aptly served as the prologue, if you will, for "Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life."[1] Margit Rowell, organizer of "Objects of Desire" and chief curator of the Department of Drawings at MOMA, is wise to the French master's particular form of radicalism. After these eggplants, she rightly implied, art would never be the same again. Cézanne isn't the only progenitor of the modern still life, but Rowell knows that he is the sine qua non of modernism. So she immediately followed *Still Life with a Ginger Jar and Eggplants* with work that built on Cézanne's historic and artistic momentum, most significantly the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, and the paintings of Matisse. Other artists featured were no less formidable: Léger, Gris, Klee, Derain, Beckmann, Miró, Davis, Mondrian, and Dufy. If Rowell has been admonished for rounding up the usual suspects, it must be said that they are great suspects, at least in the early portions of the show.

Yet, on the whole, "Objects of Desire" was frustrating, incomplete, and often dreadful —a mishmash filled with masterpieces. The show was divided into nine sections, with themes ranging from "Anatomies of Structure" (not a shabby conceit) to "Postmodern Simulacra" (an all too shabby one). Basically, the work was presented in chronological order and anyone familiar with MOMA's permanent collection recognized the established progression: from Cézanne and Picasso to Gober and Sherman. Robert and Cindy, that is, and such a decline in quality was as depressing as it was predict-

1 "Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on May 25, 1997, and closed on August 26. The exhibition will reopen at the Hayward Gallery, London, on October 9, 1997, and remain on view through January 4, 1998. A catalogue of the exhibition, by Margit Rowell, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art (231 pages, $50; $25 paper).

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able. But even at its best "Objects of Desire" was sketchy and unkempt. One suspects that Rowell, in the realization of her project, ran out of steam—or time. Consequently, the exhibition (and accompanying catalogue) felt rushed. One imagined Rowell huffing and puffing as she sprinted through the historical torrents of Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, and Pop all the way to that pinnacle of postmodernism, Jeff Koons's *One-Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Spaulding Dr. J. 241 Series)* (1985). It's difficult to know whether the true, if unintended, subject was the decline of twentieth-century art or the lack of discrimination on the part of our museum culture.

One does, however, feel a mite cantankerous kvetching about an exhibition that included paintings as ravishing as Matisse's *Purple Cyclamen* (1911–c. 1913) or as jaunty as Picasso's *Siphon, Glass, Newspaper, and Violin* (1912). "Objects of Desire" worked best when taken in bits and pieces. As such, there was plenty to relish, as the list of artists mentioned above indicates, and some of Rowell's choices were winningly off-kilter. Le Corbusier's ascetic *The Red Bowl* (1919) may not be in the same league as Braque's breathtaking *Pedestal Table* (1911), but it does come close. Morton Schamberg's *Painting VIII (Mechanical Abstraction)* (1916), a loving and delicate ode to the machine, was the standout of the Dadaist installment of the show. Frida Kahlo's disturbing and fine *Still Life with Prickly Pears* (1938) made her vaunted self-portraits look more self-absorbed than usual, and give Rowell credit for finding Léger's *Composition with Two Typewriters* (1927), a funny tribute to the title contraptions and (I think) the electric plug. Additional paintings by Patrick Henry Bruce, Gerald Murphy, Iwan Babij, Chaim Soutine, James Ensor, and even Salvador Dalí made for some inspired and oddball selections. Would that Rowell had gone out on a limb like this throughout the show.

As with any exhibition that aims to sum up a genre and a century, "Objects of Desire" had its gaps and gaffes. Rowell has been taken to task for not including more women in the show, but her omission of painters of either sex associated with the still life was so glaring that the PC patrol had to wait in line to issue its complaints. To cite just one example: the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi was represented by one painting, the de Chiricoesque *Still Life* (1919). It is, certainly, not a bad painting, but why weren't works included by the mature Morandi, the artist whose dusky paintings of bottles, boxes, and jars are his gift to this century? This was a dumbfounding exclusion. I suspect that Morandi's signature paintings are too idiosyncratic for easy categorization or theoretical explication. (He is, apparently, too idiosyncratic for many of our curators; to my knowledge not one of Morandi's paintings is currently on view in a New York museum.) It was because of such omissions that one wished Rowell had junked the show's categories and settled for pure chronology.

Not that the categories were all that snug in the first place. A probable attempt at making modern art user-friendly, Rowell's armature only served to muddle an already messy epoch. Prior to this exhibition, I had never thought of Matisse—or, for that matter, Patrick Henry Bruce—as being particularly metaphysical. Yet there was MOMA's splendid *Gourds* (1915–16) included in the section "Metaphysical Painting: Modern Classicisms/Ideal Geometries" and in proximity to de Chirico and Carlo Carra. Rowell writes that Matisse's "spiritual, essentialist statement" reveals a metaphysical temperament through "formal analogies." I would be the last person to belittle the formal analysis of art, but this is a tenuous and simplistic comparison. Even if *Gourds* and Carra's *Still Life with Triangle* (1917) share certain characteristics, there is an immeasurable gulf between the visions of Matisse and Carra. Such "formal analogies" put me in mind of museum tour guides who turn Cubism into a game of finding the guitar. Rowell is more sophisticated than that and does admit that the metaphysical associa-

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tion is "unprecedented" for Matisse. But even she must know that it's a stretch.

A bigger stretch was the intellectual hoop-jumping Rowell went through to rationalize the inclusion of a copy of Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1951). Arguing that the still life hinges on a "mysterious quality of displacement," she asserts that "the *Bicycle Wheel* has been disconnected and displaced to another, closed, circuit of signification. It has been transformed from a reality to a fiction. And a fiction, by definition, is not of this world. It is a self-contained system and generates its own peculiar time and space . . ." Heavy stuff for what is, essentially, the Duchampian equivalent of the Bronx cheer. Duchamp's doodads have, of course, very little to do with the tradition of the still life. The truth of the matter is that if Rowell had not included Duchamp the hue and cry from the keepers of our not-so-cutting edge would've been deafening. He is, after all, the edifice around which our art culture, such as it is, is based. Denying Marcel his proper place, alongside Pablo and Henri, would have been tantamount to heresy.

The definition of still life has to be malleable to include *Bicycle Wheel*, and its elasticity was put to the test once one arrived at the American flag. At this point, the still life was viewed less as a traditional artform than an excuse to exalt the Dadaist aesthetic. In fact, the latter half of "Objects of Desire" was a reminder—as if we needed one—of the baleful influence Duchamp has had on late twentieth-century art. So on the heels of Johns's *Flag* (1958), the viewer was subjected to Lichtenstein's sneakers, Warhol's Brillo boxes, Arman's accumulation of combs, Marcel Broodthaers's mussel shells, Kiki Smith's grotesqueries, Koons's floating basketball, Sherman's plate of worms, but why go on? There was little of artistic worth, although there was plenty of stuff cluttering the galleries. The only artist of stature in the final galleries of the show was Philip Guston, whose *Highball* (1979) dates from the artist's late period. I must admit, however, that never before have I so appreciated Robert Rauschenberg's enthusiasm or Claes Oldenburg's acute eye for Americana. Not that *Combine* (1959) or *Pastry Case, I* (1961–62) are American masterworks, but they were singular enough to stand out from the herd. And the works here were definitely born of a herd mentality.

It was not unexpected, then, that the latter part of the show downplayed painting in favor of Duchampian gimcrackery. Indeed, the viewer may well have concluded that still-life painting all but disappeared around the mid-century mark. (One might conclude that Americans created little significant art before 1950 as well, but this is a longstanding shortcoming of the MOMA mindset.) Postwar still-life painting was, in all likelihood, neglected because it isn't sufficiently "transgressive," an unfortunate and trendy term that finds its way into the catalogue numerous times. But "Objects of Desire" was a case study in how little transgression counts in terms of art. Is Allan McCollum's installation of oversized knick-knacks, *Perfect Vehicles* (1988–89), really of greater aesthetic merit than, say, the still-life paintings of William Bailey, an artist whose work was conspicuously absent? There is more art in a square inch of one of Bailey's paintings than is to be found in the entire still-evolving *oeuvres* of the "avant-garde" con artists included here. If Rowell had been less prone to postmodernist fashion and more attuned to the eye that delighted in *Composition with Two Typewriters*, this might have been the event it was intended to be. Instead "Objects of Desire" was an altogether happier experience traversed backwards and, for those masterpieces found toward its beginning, worth a visit anyway.

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Music

The Virgilian agenda

by Alexander Coleman

An informal poll among friends in New York (some musicians, some not) points up considerable divergence of opinion about the present stature of Virgil Thomson (1896–1989), the American composer and critic who is now the subject of an incisive and not at all hagiographical biography by Anthony Tommasini, a music critic for *The New York Times*.[1]

For a start, it should be said that Virgil Thomson's reputation is now based primarily on two things. First, he was the composer of two influential American operas written in collaboration with Gertrude Stein: *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947). The second source of his current reputation is the witty yet unremittingly highbrow music criticism he wrote for *The New York Herald Tribune* between 1940 and the fall of 1954. Thomson's position as a serious composer who also held a critic's post on a major daily newspaper makes him a rare if not, indeed, unique case in the annals of American cultural life. Certainly, nothing like it could happen today.

Both of the above-mentioned operas, along with his last opera, *Lord Byron* (1972), are now available on the compact disc format, and a selection from his books, *Tribune* criticism, and later contributions to *The New York Review of Books* can still be found in *A Virgil Thomson Reader*, edited by Thomson himself with an introduction by John Rockwell (Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

As I say, there was little consensus among my correspondents about the present stature of the work of Virgil Thomson as a composer. The mere mention of his name to one distinguished and well-known contemporary American composer brought a dismissive guffaw, followed by a short but devastating tirade full of derision for Thomson as a composer. This same irritated composer did cut Thomson some slack as a music critic, however, voicing guarded approval for the musical judgments pronounced in the *Tribune* and elsewhere.

A few—very few—others had vague memories of performances of the once well-known orchestral suites drawn from Thomson's ventures into film music, the works that still occasionally show up (sometimes at Pops concerts) known as *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, *The River*, or *Louisiana Story*. One friend thought of Thomson now only as a caustic critical presence, to be read for his panache and strut no matter what the subject. Going further afield, there were curious lacunae, studied slights, apparent forgetfulness. Consider: in a work so inclusive as the revised and expanded version of Robert Craft's *Stravinsky: The Chronicle of a Friendship* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1994)—a book in which everyone in the then reigning cultural worlds of both East and West coasts gets mentioned at least

1 *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle*, by Anthony Tommasini; Norton, 605 pages, $30.

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once—the name of Virgil Thomson does not appear in the index, although he is a very visible and a not especially flattering presence in a few episodes of Craft's *Chronicle*.

A bad slip on the part of the indexer? I think not. He appears as "Virgil Thomason" in Jan Swafford's *Charles Ives: A Life with Music* (Norton, 1996). Not a good sign. Mr. Tommasini, who knew Thomson well toward the end of his life and did a doctoral dissertation on Thomson's piano "portraits," must have heard much testimony from the master himself about how quickly some artists and composers are marginalized or decanonized. Mr. Tommasini's anecdote on this subject early in his book is both astonishing and utterly convincing. Here it is, *in toto*:

> On a 1992 edition of the *Texaco Opera Quiz*, the popular intermission feature during the Metropolitan Opera's Saturday matinee broadcasts, three expert panelists were asked to name an opera with a saint in it. The panel was stumped at first. Then one person recalled Tchaikovsky's opera about Saint Joan. Another offered Messiaen's opera about Saint Francis. Finally, a panelist, straddling and stretching the question, suggested Liszt's oratorio on Saint Elizabeth and an obscure work about Saint Cecilia by a turn-of-the-century Vatican-sanctioned hack, Lifinio Refice. No one thought of *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

Given the exhaustive musical knowledge possessed by most of the Texaco panelists, I have no doubt that they could have given key details of the plot of every stillborn American opera ever written, from Deems Taylor's *The King's Henchman* (libretto by Edna St. Vincent Millay) and Howard Hanson's *Merry Mount* to Roger Sessions's *Montezuma*, Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land*, and Samuel Barber's *Vanessa*. But no one recalled *Four Saints*. This, however, is just one side of the picture. Although the name of Virgil Thomson is most associated with something called "simplicity" in music, a quality he always brandished against the mostly Austro-German "complexity boys," Mr. Tommasini's biographical investigations also reveal a positive side to the still-accumulating ledger of ups and downs in Thomson's reputation. Here we must consider the testimony of Philip Glass, the famous—and at times reviled—author of *Einstein on the Beach*. Thomson, Mr. Glass noted, was

> the godfather of experimental opera. Virgil was the maverick. He knew that the mode and style of operatic presentation, the content, the form—all these had to be renovated. When I started working with Robert Wilson, Virgil was the only person we had as a model.

The Stein-Thomson opera—striking, too, for its all-black ensemble—did recast the possibility for American opera well away from the European mold. As Mabel Dodge Luhan predicted at the time, "*Four Saints in Three Acts* would destroy opera the way Picasso has destroyed old painting!"

The wording may have been exorbitant, but surely the melodramatic formulae of "grand" opera—whether it be Wagner, Meyerbeer, Saint-Saëns, Auber, even the Strauss-Hoffmansthal collaborations—all of them were just waiting for a fall. The genial nonsense, the alliterative play of Gertrude Stein gave Thomson the vehicle for his abstractive musical elaboration, as in St. Ignatius's ecstatic "If a magpie in the sky on the sky cannot cry if the pigeon on the grass alas can alas and to pass the pigeon on the grass alas. . . ." This was the start of the Thomsonian agenda—an admixture of his renowned "anti-complexity" bias, his fascination with Dada, his instinctive reaction against technical virtuosity in orchestration, even his own limitations as a composer and craftsman. Mr. Tommasini's study is the critical yet still fervent documentation of how that agenda got put into practice.

Thomson's musical aesthetic started on its wayward and quirky course early, when he was an apprentice pianist and organist in his

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native Kansas City. It continued throughout his years as an undergraduate music major at Harvard, where his music professor gave him a good rap across the knuckles in his senior year: "your work in the examination was of not sufficient merit . . . that you could be recommended for the degree with distinction, although you passed the examination. But your work was so mediocre in harmony, counterpoint and fugue that on the evidence submitted no other verdict was possible."

Thomson did excel as accompanist to the Harvard Glee Club for their European tour of 1921, a trip that brought him a fellowship to Paris, the world of "Les Six," and the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger. Although Thomson was always a Satie fanatic and Gallophile, the hidden ghost behind his harmonic plainness is the music of Charles Ives—not the massive tone clusters of the "Concord" Sonata or the more raucous moments of *Three Places in New England*, but the simpler and more evocative pages. This was the "simple" Ives that was precisely the aspect of his own music which most irritated Ives himself in his old age ("God damn simplicity," he once shouted to John Kirkpatrick).

It is good to remember that Ives, twenty-two years older than Thomson, had pretty much swept "the courtly muses of Europe" from his musical vocabulary, as his contentious battles with his German-trained mentor at Yale, Horatio Parker, demonstrated. Parker had called the young Ives's experiments in polytonality "hogging all the keys at one meal," and was all the more repelled by Ives's easy acceptance of Antonin Dvořák's suggestions to young American composers of the time that the use of hymn tunes and folk music of all sorts might serve as the beginnings of a national music. Ives certainly did make rich use of all the materials from popular musical culture that his bandmaster father had laid on the son. His early symphonies do have a gratefully Dvořákian echo—The *Symphony from the New World* having been written just one year before Ives took up his studies at Yale.

The influence of Ives on Thomson is a minor matter to Mr. Tommasini, since he has so many other fish to fry, but it is useful to place Ives as one of the prime makers of Thomson's way with sound. Thomson wrote a ruminative and well-pondered essay on Ives now collected in *A Virgil Thomson Reader*, and toward the end of his life he did simply state that Ives was "the father of us all," referring to the "Commando Squad" of young American composers who first came to prominence in the Thirties—Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, Walter Piston, Elie Siegmeister, and Bernard Hermann among so many others. These are the composers who are rather archly described by Ives's biographer as the "milder moderns," some of whom were encouraged and performed by Serge Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

There may be a more obvious motive for Thomson's careful distance from Ives even during the life of the older composer. Virgil Thomson was a homosexual from way back to his Kansas City youth, and it is not something he at all wished on himself. "I didn't want to be queer," Thomson said in an interview. "No! No! No! That was another hurdle I didn't want to have to jump over. Nowadays it's much easier." Charles Ives was a homophobe of uncommon verbal spleen. As Ives's biographer notes, "Violence and panic exactly describe Ives's response to the specter of homosexuality, which was part of a fear of feminization even more threatening to him than to most artists of his time."

Thomson had to grow up with the kind of opprobrium that Ives and his generation handed out to homosexuals in the arts, and he was, furthermore, well aware of how icily Ives had treated his own disciple and future biographer, Henry Cowell, after Cowell had been convicted for homosexual activities and sent to San Quentin for four years. Mr. Tommasini had the privilege of getting to know Thomson when he was in old age and well-ensconced in the Chelsea Hotel, and is able to bring to his critical scrutiny a post-

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Stonewall frankness regarding an inner drama within Thomson that the very reticent subject never would himself have had the nerve or bravura to divulge: "Thomson would not allow his sexuality to be referred to in print. In his 420 page autobiography there is no mention of it, though there are veiled, mostly contrived stories of youthful attachments to women." Thomson disliked the term "gay" and was adamantly opposed to the glaring publicity which accompanied the gay liberation movement. He came perilously close to Cowell's fate, since he was picked up in a Brooklyn male brothel in 1942 (along with a sixty-nine-year-old Irish senator from Boston, by the way). This incident, retold in its entirety in chapter 20, could have irreparably damaged Thomson as an artist and finished him definitively at *The New York Herald Tribune*; the matter was artfully managed somehow, though the owner of the Brooklyn operation spent twenty years in Sing Sing. His sexuality is a constant threat and shadow over Thomson from the very beginning. Mr. Tommasini notes that even in Thomson's high-school yearbook, "his graduation photograph was captioned, 'O Shades of Oscar Wilde, Millet and Paderewski.' This may have amused the student editors, but the barb could have been no laughing matter to Thomson."

The stories and the gossip embedded in this study should not divert anyone from the larger issues that Thomson's musical and critical career represent. One thing is the Virgilian agenda, clearly under way in France under the tutelage of Nadia Boulanger, and very much audible in the opera and the orchestral suites from the Thirties. The style with which this same agenda is promulgated is directly related to its content, and this means vamping well beyond college days. Here is Thomson at twenty-six, recommending a demeanor for possible and future patrons: "Whenever I go to call on a middle-aged or elderly person of either sex, but particularly men, I do my complexion with cold cream and hot water, I run all the way up the stairs, and then slap myself as I ring the bell. Talk well, of course; put over your line, or whatever the cue is. But look your most adolescent."

A portrait emerges, not especially flattering. Thomson was obviously *prepotente*, supremely self-assured from the public point of view, very vain, very *mondain*, someone who evinced only rarely a sense of self-doubt or spiritual torment, a bully. He was not about to parcel out to the world any more of himself than he cared to reveal, and as Mr. Tommasini so carefully indicates, the closet life of Thomson well into his maturity and even old age required his fanatic supervision among all friends concerning what people were saying about him.

Nowhere in this study is there a kind of summing up, a pondered overview of the whole of Thomson's achievement, but an audition of the many recordings gives the sense that he was not at all comfortable or fluent in purely orchestral composition. When his sometimes fellow critic on the *Tribune*, Paul Bowles, reviewed a Thomson symphony and found it "awkward, droll and rough, but it is not static," that sounds about right. On the other hand, an attentive hearing of the two Stein-Thomson collaborations reveals once again their mastery of surprising rhythms, the joyful tension and release gained by inventive and ever-changing patterns of lengths and stress. Thomson represented, as did Kurt Weill, a happy apostasy within both the European and American avant-garde. He was so full of the remembered music of his youth—hymns, dances, parlor songs, negro gospel, waltzes, and two-steps—that the Schoenbergian revolution never really appealed to his ear. Though Thomson will forever rail against the "German-Austrian musical complex" in articles and interviews, I am not at all sure that Mr. Tommasini has done justice to Thomson's individual responses, in specific cases, to composers who did not at all jibe with the agenda. For instance, *A Virgil Thomson Reader* contains meticulous and admiring accounts of two works by Arnold Schoenberg—the Piano Concerto and the *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. The same for Alban

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Berg's Violin Concerto and Anton Webern's Symphony.

Mr. Tommasini is at his most trenchant when he observes and analyzes the glaring conflict of interest between a composer with performance ambitions acting as a music critic with an agenda. In this regard, he is not above a good zinger on the matter: "To no one's surprise but his own, performances of his works by top-name artists and orchestras dropped off after he left the *Herald Tribune*, and invitations to conduct declined." When the composer Peggy Glanville-Hicks approached Thomson about her replacing him on the paper early on in 1954, suggesting that "being the chief critic of so influential a paper would no doubt be a boon to her own career as a composer, Thomson grinned, looked her in the eye, and said, 'Baby! I've sucked that lemon dry.'"

For personal and artistic reasons, paranoia was never far from Thomson's spiritual state, but there is one anecdote in this study that must have given him every reason to feel like an oppressed minority in more than one sense. A fellow composer and student of Nadia Boulanger, Theodore Chanler, wrote a savage review of *Four Saints in Three Acts* for the then influential *Modern Music*, edited by Minna Lederman. Thomson was hurt and baffled by the review but let it pass. A decade later, when an early biographer of Thomson requested from Chanler a more detailed commentary on the review, he confessed that he really loved *Four Saints*, had been "much moved" by it, but had been hectored and browbeaten into writing a negative review of the work by the formidable and very dour symphonist Roger Sessions, "who simply pulverized me with scorn and indignation at having dared to like it." The fact that someone of the stature of Roger Sessions could lower himself to practice such conformist cultural Stalinism does give pause. This whole matter—the tyranny of the avant-garde in certain crucial moments of American cultural history—deserves a lot more treatment than Mr. Tommasini is willing to give it. And, too, the nasty commentary on the audiences at *Four Saints* by such luminaries as Olin Downes and Wallace Stevens makes Thomson's golden rule all the more urgent: "Never review the audience."

Virgil Thomson did survive to the state of an aged eminence, with honors at the Kennedy Center among other events. When, at the end of his life, he toted up the royalty payments he had received over the years for *The Mother of Us All*, he found that over one thousand separate productions had taken place, in colleges, amateur groups, or small opera companies. Having hammered a few nails into the set of *The Mother of Us All* when it was produced in Sanders Theatre at Harvard in the mid Fifties, I can vouch for its total theatricality, the bite and the charm of it.

Concert notes

Palestrina, by Hans Pfitzner, in a production by the Royal Opera at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York.

If the composer Hans Pfitzner is remembered at all today, it's as a Nazi dupe, a man of considerable musical vision corrupted by his own grandiloquent dreams and a persistent sense that his genius was not properly acknowledged. Like other celebrated German musicians of his time—Richard Strauss and Wilhelm Furtwängler among them—Pfitzner was a respected cultural figure who opted to coexist with the Nazis. Though his nationalistic sentiments doubtless made it easier to remain in Germany once artistic freedom was squelched, Pfitzner's hopes of a garlanded life under Hitler were to be dashed, for the Third Reich had little use for this particular paragon of Holy German Art.

Pfitzner's postwar reputation remains blemished. History has judged his decision to toil under National Socialism a devil's bargain. So why, despite our clear repudiation of Nazi politics, are we fascinated by figures such as Pfitzner? If anything, our in-

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terest in these talented sinners appears to have increased lately. One need only look at the host of books, videos, and compact discs that purport to shed light on the topic to realize the depth of our obsession.

It was therefore no surprise to learn that Pfitzner's magnum opus, the opera *Palestrina*, was the toast of London's Covent Garden earlier this year. Much talked about, it was soon snapped up for the second Lincoln Center Festival, where it was performed at the Metropolitan Opera House three times between July 21 and 26. The funny thing is, of course, *Palestrina* is no more a Nazi cultural artifact than Wagner's *Parsifal*—which is to say that circumstance, in its inimitably perverse way, has once more conspired to associate the art of one time with that of another. *Palestrina* was not written in 1933 or at any point during the Third Reich's twelve-year existence; it was composed between 1912 and 1915 and premiered in Munich in 1917, at the height of another great German catastrophe. Yet now it stands for some as a window on the Reich.

Thankfully, that's not how director Nikolaus Lehnhoff viewed matters, for his staging, almost amazingly, made neither overt nor covert reference to this work's checkered reputation. In fact, Lehnhoff (with the aid of Tobias Hoheisel's coolly elegant, occasionally abstract sets and Bettina J. Walter's simple period costumes) proved resolute in rooting this production firmly in sixteenth-century Rome and Trent, which is exactly where Pfitzner set it. Too bad the composer wasn't more a man of the theater. Like Wagner, Pfitzner penned his own libretto, but the plotting in *Palestrina* is sloppy and the characters underdeveloped. Even the opera's themes of freedom and creativity seem to bump up awkwardly against each other.

Lehnhoff did his best to overcome these obstacles, but some of this nearly five-hour opera's problems are intrinsic. Part of the challenge involves the story itself, which, at its core, concerns the composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's creation of the *Missa Papae Marcelli* ("Pope Marcellus Mass"). Pfitzner calls his opera a musical legend in three acts, and, indeed, much of the story is the stuff of legend, specifically the oft-repeated falsehood that the real Palestrina "saved" music by demonstrating to the Council of Trent the wonders of music outside the bounds of Gregorian chant.

Pfitzner's lack of theatrical imagination is so profound, the opera's title character doesn't even appear during the second act. He comes back for the third, but that's really only a short coda. In some ways, then, *Palestrina* is actually two one-act operas and an epilogue. The work begins with Palestrina refusing a commission from Cardinal Borromeo, his erstwhile friend and (in this production) subsequent torturer. After the composer settles into a slumber, ghosts of past masters visit him and impart the inspiration for the mass. In the morning, his son and pupil find Palestrina still asleep and the pages of the masterwork strewn about the floor. In Act Two, our attention is diverted to the Council of Trent, where a host of unruly cardinals violently debate everything from Protestantism to the placement of chairs. In the third act, Palestrina is saved after the masterly mass has been heard by Pope Pius IV, who then appears at the composer's door to thank him.

On stage, tenor Thomas Moser proved an underwhelming, often hulking Palestrina. Bland rather than inspiring singing characterized his largely unaffecting portrayal. Baritone Alan Held, as Borromeo, made a better impression but was at times too mechanically menacing. As Ighino, Palestrina's son, Ruth Ziesak provided welcome ebullience, though Randi Stene, portraying Palestrina's pupil, was less memorable in her trouser role. Surprisingly, the host of Council of Trent cameos mostly disappointed. Sergei Leiferkus turned Count Luna into a snarling caricature, while Thomas Allen was simply dull as Cardinal Morone. Robert Tear's bumbling Bishop of Budoja made a more favorable impression, as did Anthony Rolfe Johnson's addled Abdisu of Assyria. In the pit, matters were in

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the dedicated, capable hands of the rising young conductor Christian Thielemann, a passionate advocate of this score. Thielemann led the Covent Garden performances as well, so one was a bit taken aback to find the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House playing unevenly. Thielemann appeared to be wrestling with this music more than mastering it. True, Pfitzner's bloated, disjointed, rhetorical score has its challenges, but it also possesses moments of great beauty, not that one noticed on opening night. The Covent Garden Chorus did its duty nobly, but never so effectively as to transcend the more mundane aspects of the libretto.

In the end, opera lovers need be grateful that so well-intentioned a production of *Palestrina* made it to these shores. Outside of Germany and Austria, audiences aren't likely to encounter this flawed masterwork. Bucking the tide of political correctness, Lehnhoff's staging tackled Pfitzner's opera on its own terms, rightly disregarding the composer's subsequent associations. If this wasn't a perfect production, that may be because no team can ever really circumvent the opera's basic shortcomings. Yet those who ventured to the Met were at least rewarded by something precious, a *Palestrina* shorn of unnecessary baggage.

—*David Mermelstein*

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The media

Overrating TV

by James Bowman

Not sex 'n' violence again! But they're so boring! Or at least the endless, po-faced discussions of how or whether they may be kept off television would be boring if it were not for the ludicrous public spectacle they afford. On the one side is the inevitably comic Grundyism of those who devote their lives to counting up the number of times someone says the word *ass* in the family hour of prime time (twenty-nine times in the month of February, according to Thomas Johnson of the Parents' Television Council); on the other side is the nauseating hypocrisy involved in the cash-engorged television networks' striking attitudes as idealistic defenders of free speech. It is a farce which pushes that of the complementary priggeries of pro- and anti-tobacco forces off the stage.

Now, however, all the huffing and puffing have produced a concrete result. As of October 1, the voluntary ratings system for network television shows, in effect only since the beginning of the year, will be supplemented with additional information, about the "intensity" and frequency of offensive material, designed to help parents more finely to calibrate their regulation of their children's television viewing habits. The networks fiercely resisted any amendments to the age-based rating system—devised last year with the help of Jack Valenti, the head of the Motion Picture Association of America who designed a similar system for the movies back in the 1960s. But this system had come under such withering criticism from would-be congressional regulators and parent and children advocacy groups that all except NBC finally accepted an emended version of it in July.

In return, their congressional critics, led by Representative Edwin Markey of Massachusetts, have agreed to a three-year moratorium on new legislation concerning program content. Many of the advocacy groups and some strongly anti-smut legislators, including senators Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Sam Brownback of Kansas, considered this a corrupt bargain and refused to be bound by Markey's promise. There has also very recently been a strong movement in the House of Representatives, to which the Speaker gave his support, to bring back the "family hour" by law. But there does appear to be a good chance that Representative Markey's moratorium will hold, at least until it becomes clear how, or if, the so-called "V-chip," due to be installed in new television sets from next year, is working.

The original ratings system introduced at the beginning of the year included four ratings for general programming—TV-G for all audiences; TV-PG for shows like "Baywatch" thought by their producers to contain "infrequent coarse language, limited violence, and some suggestive dialogue and situations"; TV-14 for those the networks thought contained "sophisticated themes, sexual content, strong language and more

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intense violence" such as "Cybill," "The Simpsons," or "Murder One"; and TV-M for those like "NYPD Blue" thought to be unsuitable for children under seventeen. In addition, there were two children's ratings, TV-Y indicating a show suitable for even the youngest children, and TV-Y7 for those recommended only for children over seven.

Such classifications were thought to be too vague and, because they were awarded by the networks themselves, too inconsistent. CBS rated "Late Night with David Letterman" as no more than a TV-PG while NBC thought "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" merited a TV-14. Also, some shows like "Seinfeld" and "Homicide: Life on the Streets" could fluctuate from week to week, from TV-PG to TV-14 and back again. For this reason, the negotiators adopted in July a system which will tack on some additional letters to the existing age designations, as V for "intense violence," S for "intense sexual situations," L for "strong coarse language," and D for "intensely suggestive dialogue." To the children's categories there may be added an FV indicating "fantasy violence." Odd, that. Isn't all the violence on TV, bar that which the networks' journalistic arms are lucky enough to catch on the evening news, fantasy violence?

As is always the problem with high-minded attempts to protect people from themselves, the people most in need of the protection are those least likely to get it. As Walter Goodman pointed out in *The New York Times*, echoing the language of "intensity" from the raters, "the ratings will most intensely safeguard children who are already lucky enough to have a set of attentive parents around."

> As for the children who are more at risk of infection by television—the ones without two parents at home or with parents who can't figure out the system or are busy making a living or just won't be bothered—they will probably go on spending hours before the tube without knowing they aren't supposed to enjoy dirty words. What effect television may have on a child's behavior and prospects remains uncertain but can it be as great as the effect of having parents who aren't around or don't care?

Parents who do care are those who would presumably be vigilant in any case and would probably know without having to be told by abecedarian censors that "Friends" or "Seinfeld" are likely to contain "intensely suggestive dialogue" or that "Homicide" or "Law & Order" may contain "intense violence."

NBC has so far excluded itself from participation in the new scheme, introducing the idea of (in Goodman's words) "worthwhile violence" in shows such as *Schindler's List* and "The Odyssey" and warning against the dangers of censorship from Washington at the behest of "radical" religious organizations. It will come as a surprise, perhaps, that this attitude has been taken up by the country's most profitable network, together with the "creative" people who supply them with their excellent product, with nothing but the noblest of motives. But it is not surprising at all that the press which covers the debate feels itself constrained by its own lofty pursuit of objectivity and balance from heaping upon such arguments the ridicule and contempt they deserve.

John Carmody in *The Washington Post*'s "TV Column," for instance, reports on NBC's courting of the TV Writers Guild, assembled in Pasadena in July. Dick Wolf, producer of NBC's "Players" (a new comedy-drama for next season), told the writers that the additional rating letters (NBC will continue to use the age-based system) were "absolutely coercion . . . and if you people don't think that this is a basic First Amendment issue, and truly frightening in its implications, you should do some homework." He was especially angry at Senator John McCain for pushing the voluntary ratings on the networks: "How come none of you have talked about the irony of Senator McCain leading the charge on protecting children from those murderous thirty-inch Sonys out

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there, when this is a man who voted against the five-day waiting period and voted against the Brady Bill? . . . This guy should have been burned months ago."

Carmody then quoted McCain as saying, very reasonably, that the ratings business and the gun-control business were quite distinct matters and mildly noting that "perhaps Mr. Wolf is afraid to give parents this information because it may lead them to find his programs objectionable." Mr. Wolf then "fired back" that he "would be happy to debate the Senator at any time about the glaring contradiction between his taking on the mantle or being a protector of children while doing nothing to protect children from handguns." "McCain hadn't responded at press time," noted Carmody.

Speaking from an even more exalted position, also to the TV writers in Pasadena, was Warren Littlefield, president of NBC Entertainment:

> In my 20 years of broadcasting I have never been more afraid than I am of the content-rating issue . . . I've been afraid of a lot of things. This one is serious. It started, I think, as a little snowball that was rolling down the hill. And as broadcasters, I think we're looking at a potential avalanche right now. . . . It's no longer about a label. It's about controlling content.

Likewise, the network's president, Robert C. Wright, is quoted by Lawrie Mifflin in *The New York Times* as saying that the deal with the politicians and advocacy groups was a "slippery slope" down which his unfortunate competitors were sliding toward "censorship."

But a more subtle argument was used by Rosalyn P. Weinman, who has the title of executive vice president for broadcast standards at NBC. In an interview with Lawrie Mifflin and in an op-ed piece of her own in *The New York Times*, she cited the importance of context given to the sex and violence in such recent network offerings as *Schindler's List* and "The Odyssey"—and, she said, "context cannot be expressed in a rating letter."

> Parenting isn't simple. Neither is labeling television. In our quick-fix culture, the idea of just pressing a button to protect our children is seductive, but it won't work. In fact, the new labels can blur the distinction between high-quality television and programs with gratuitous sex and violence. For example, "The Odyssey," a TV movie based on Homer's epic that was broadcast last May, would have carried a V rating, because it included some violent scenes, even though it was the kind of educational program parents want their children to watch. When the V-chip becomes reality, all shows with a specific rating could be indiscriminately blocked . . .
>
> Like everyone else, interest groups and politicians have an important right to protest shows they don't like. But they shouldn't decide what people should see. And make no mistake, this new system is the first step by Congress toward suppressing certain kinds of shows.
>
> Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut has said the issue is not about "rating the garbage," but how to "get rid of the garbage."
>
> When politicians decide to define what garbage is, all Americans have to live with their definition. This means fewer choices and programs that are less interesting, entertaining and provocative. And it could mean fewer programs that raise awareness for important issues, like domestic violence.

Talk about garbage! But Dr. Weinman gives the game away when she writes of "gratuitous sex and violence," relying on the now venerable argument that if the s and v are "artistically justified" then they're OK. The pop culture saw through this one a long time ago with its jokes about earnest young actresses agreeing to take their clothes off for men to ogle them so long as it is "artistically justified." The fact is, whatever may be the case with sex or violence in serious artistic media, everybody knows that they are always gratuitous on television.

For instance, the networks are resisting

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the motion of the House of Representatives to bring back the "family hour" in the first hour of prime time because, as John Carmody put it, "the TV business is far more competitive than it was in the family hour's heyday, and . . . they must maintain their ability to appeal to the most attractive target audiences (read: viewers eighteen to thirty-four years old)." In other words, the networks know that it is *because* of their portrayal of sex and violence that people are tuning in. This makes the idea of setting serious and artistic representations of sex and violence against the merely "gratuitous" kind absurd. The so-called "context" of the serious shows is not, after all, the Holocaust (*Schindler's List*) or Greek legends ("The Odyssey") as Dr. Weinman pretends but *the TV context*, in which titillation is the name of the game, whether one is ostensibly showing programs with the seal of high-cultural approval or not.

Another version of the "context" argument, for example, came from John Wells, executive producer of "E.R.," who, according to Lawrie Mifflin,

> said he feared that the labels would cause many families to tar all similarly rated television shows with the same brush.
>
> "It will make it much more difficult to get a show like E.R. on the air," Mr. Wells said. "We have violence, but it's in the context of showing the terrible effects of violence—it's exactly the sort we should see. Violence is part of our society and as artists we are right to chronicle it."

This is even more laughable than Dr. Weinman's argument. Oh, so *that's* what you're doing, Mr. Barnum! How do people like this escape the ridicule that ought by rights to be heaped upon their heads for such disingenuous arguments? Notice that they never quite come right out and say what they prefer to assume, namely that television is in the business of disinterestedly producing high art, in which the question of gratuitous sex or violence might (or might not) be justified. This is because there is simply no escaping the fact that their network is selling a product to people who make no pretense of desiring an artistic experience but who simply want to be titillated.

Neither "The Odyssey" nor *Schindler's List* nor any others among the tiny percentage of NBC's shows which might have some slight pretensions to artistic quality have to show sex or violence to achieve their presumably high-minded ends. Aeschylus and Sophocles managed quite well without having the violent acts themselves on the stage in Greek tragedy. But the commercial successes like "Seinfeld" or "E.R."—they *do* have to be suggestive or explicit in well-recognized ways because that is what people watch them for. It is as if you sat through *Schindler's List* (as perhaps some of the millions who watched it did) in order to catch a glimpse of somebody's naked backside. Only with NBC's run-of-the-mill product, the naked backside (figuratively speaking) is practically all there is.

That is why, for some years past, the prime-time sitcoms have vied with each other for such poor, as yet unused double-entendres as they can find, like hungry dogs fighting for scraps of offal in Senator Lieberman's garbage dump. For Dr. Weinman or Mr. Wells to pretend that their employers are engaged in an artistic enterprise and not in the business of titillating people for huge sums of money is simply ludicrous. For them to add that there would be dire consequences for the republic were they and their colleagues to make less huge sums of money by being restrained from certain sorts of titillation as broadcast over the public airwaves is not only ludicrous but vicious and dishonest as well. For there are a number of ways in which NBC stands to gain from refusing to go along with the agreement reached by the other networks. They will receive the gain in the reduced pressure for legislation while not having to pay the price in terms of putting off potential viewers. As Lawrie Mifflin noted, they could also gain "if producers decide to steer shows with adult themes to NBC because

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they know it will not be adding a V, S, L, or D label that could chase some viewers away."

All that having been said, I must add that I myself am skeptical about the usefulness of television "ratings" for sex and violence. There is certainly an argument to be made for leaving all the televisual garbage unraked and unburied so that its noisome stench will warn off parents who might otherwise think their children were coming to no harm through watching TV. As I have often said before, watching television is bad for children. Period. It is a myth and a chimera, subscribed to by guilt-ridden parents in need of the televisual baby sitter and connived at by the greedy TV industry that, if only the programming is of high enough quality, TV will stop being bad for children and start being good for them. It won't. Ever. Because at its best it is a wholly passive experience and it takes them away from those active ones, such as reading or playing games or practicing a musical instrument, from which alone they can learn something other than the sophisticated, prematurely knowing cynicism that TV produces.

But this is a hard saying for busy and indulgent parents in the late twentieth-century. They will continue, I predict, to prefer to believe that exactly calibrated government or industry regulation of the dangers their children face will allow them to continue to be uninvolved in raising them, or in instilling in them the moral will to resist those voyeuristic temptations which even the most socially conscious networks are in the business of dangling in front of them. Not for the first time, one of our big debates about "the media" will prove to have changed nothing of any importance.

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Books

Faulkner & modernism

by James W. Tuttleton

In *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, Daniel J. Singal, a professor of history at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, remarks that "intellectual historians have almost invariably steered clear" of Faulkner with the effect that "one subject remains largely unexplored—the structure and nature of his thought."[1] This will come as a surprise to Faulkner's bibliographers, who are inundated each year with fresh historical, critical, textual, and biographical studies galore. Faulkner is very probably the most extensively analyzed and most frequently criticized of American writers. Practically every scrap of his literary expression has been subjected to repeated interpretation. But it *is* the case that most of the criticism of Faulkner has been produced by students of literature rather than of history. The boundary of these disciplines having been blurred, however, novels are now, for better or worse, the historian's domain and history the literary critic's. Mr. Singal therefore intends to relate Faulkner's work "to the cultural and intellectual discourse of the era"—a project that necessarily involves, I should imagine, the novelist's relationship to the modernist movement in all its salient forms.

In offering to trace this relationship, Mr. Singal provides an introductory chapter defining the cultural and intellectual temper of the Victorian era. He then turns to the era of aesthetic modernism and defines its typical characteristics, as abstracted from some of the major modernist works of the early twentieth century. The balance of the book is a series of chapters devoted to Faulkner himself: his family origins in Oxford, Mississippi—particularly the importance of his great-grandfather, Colonel W. C. Falkner, author of *The White Rose of Memphis* and an embodiment of the flamboyant "Cavalier" sensibility of the old South; Faulkner's World War I experience and its aftermath; the *fin-de-siècle* character of his literary apprenticeship; his eventual discovery of "Yoknapatawpha County" as an adequate field of fictional invention, a discovery brilliantly justified in that modernist masterwork *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); his rejection of the Cavalier myth, or the illusion of a Southern aristocracy, as he struggled to achieve a "modernist identity," a struggle that culminated in the pivotal work *Light in August* (1932); the growing mastery of Faulkner's historical understanding, as it was reflected in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936); and Faulkner's slow artistic decline, beginning with *Go Down, Moses* (1942), culminating in his death in 1962.

I confess at the outset to a particular liking for cultural history, for criticism that relates an author to the intellectual and artistic tendencies of his age. Literary study is now so disfigured by polysyllabic gobbledygook, so taken up with ideological

1 *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, by Daniel J. Singal; University of North Carolina, 366 pages, $29.95.

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posturing and with the arcane theories of unreadable Continentals, that it is a pleasure to follow the discussion of a matter-of-fact historian who admires Faulkner and wants to make plain why we ought to admire him, too.

Mr. Singal's analysis, which has a number of fine paragraphs, concludes that Faulkner was no racist but a deeply sensitive white who felt a personal and familial burden of guilt over slavery and projected in black characters such as Dilsey, Joe Christmas, and Lucas Beauchamp a complexity of motive and an intuitive understanding as well as a strength of will not merely admirable but heroic in an especially modern sense. Singal's account of Faulkner's several heroines also absolves the novelist from the charge, so often found in lightweight feminist criticism, that Faulkner is somehow a male chauvinist who subordinated or even degraded women—a charge that arises from erroneously identifying the novelist with some of his most misogynistic characters.

Mr. Singal is also to be credited with a responsible summary of at least some of the qualities of literary modernism as it developed in Faulkner's era. He is quite good at showing how modernism was more than a "radical experimentation in artistic style, a deliberate cultivation of the perverse and decadent, and the flaunting of outrageous behavior designed to shock the bourgeoisie." In stressing the "intense self-knowledge" pursued by modernists, he also notes their felt obligation "to loosen restraints, open oneself to the world, and perfect one's ability to experience experience," their ambition to explore and fashion meaning "in a world where meaning must constantly be re-created."

But as much as I cotton to this kind of critical study, it must be said that Mr. Singal's intellectual history falls disastrously short of the mark. Trouble signs begin to appear early in his definition of the Victorian ethos that preceded modernism. This historical epoch has been the subject of a significant reassessment by many excellent and well-informed historians: one thinks, for example, of Gertrude Himmelfarb in *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (1995) and James Lincoln Collier in *The Rise of Selfishness in America* (1991). But Singal treats the Victorian period exactly as *les jeunes*, the modernists themselves, saw it—as a period of old-fashioned fuddy-duddies who espoused "thrift, diligence, and persistence" only to sustain "a burgeoning capitalist economy." For Singal, the Victorian vision of the world was "largely free from sin and discord, reflecting . . . immense optimism about the progress that the industrial order would bring." "For intellectually inclined southerners," he remarks, "Victorian thought meant typically the 'sweetness and light' of Matthew Arnold."

Did it? Such remarks give no idea of the lively intelligence and the spiritual turmoil of the period. That such optimism was wholly alien to the Christian foundations of Anglo-American Victorian culture, which took original sin and the ubiquity of evil as the norm, seems never to have occurred to Singal. The final flaw of Victorianism—the one that Singal seems most indignant about—is that "the Victorians saw art as didactic in purpose—as a vehicle for communicating and illustrating preordained moral truths." The historical antecedent of this idea, which had its origin in classical antiquity and which remains alive even today (extending past the defunct modernism of Faulkner's time), seems never to have occurred to Mr. Singal.

In any case, *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* notes the mixture in Faulkner of traditional and youthful values (something true of all of us, I should think). But he insists on there being "two William Faulkners," "two central selves—old-fashioned country gentleman and contemporary writer," a Victorian Faulkner and a modernist Faulkner. Singal, it must be said at once, doesn't care a rap for the conservative Victorian self that stood for values such as honor and courage and compassion and pity, or for an art that pretended to com-

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municate timeless truths. For him, there aren't any.

I shall return to the idea of "two" Faulkners in a moment. But first it is necessary to say that *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* does not really establish a connection between Faulkner's mind and work and the cultural history of the modernist era. Although a great many ideas about the physical and psychological nature of man entered modernist discourse, there is nothing in this book relating Faulkner's thought to any new scientific understanding. The world wars, the stock market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression go virtually unmentioned, as do other cultural phenomena and the ideas and explanations that attended them. Huge sections of the Faulkner *oeuvre* go unmentioned as well.

Only three "ideas," by my count, inform Mr. Singal's intellectual and cultural history of Faulkner's work. The first is Freudianism. About Freud, Faulkner—perhaps evasively—said he knew nothing whatsoever. Still, he was better read than he let on and may have been covering his tracks. In any case, Freudianism was everywhere in the air. And certainly Singal is right that modernism coincided with the spreading influence of Freud in America. I do not disagree with Singal's inference that "it should be no surprise that identity would take its place as a major subject—perhaps *the* major subject—of [Faulkner's] fiction." I am even sympathetic with Mr. Singal's interest in how "the Cavalier sensibility, a 'faulty identity'" derived from the antebellum planter class—an identity that we see reflected in the romanticism of *Flags in the Dust*, *Sartoris*, and other such fiction—"could be held directly responsible for the catastrophe of the Civil War, as well as the South's subsequent descent into virulent racism and poverty." Singal, I believe, is quite right to find Faulkner devoting "the greater part of his efforts as a modernist writer both to savaging the mythic Cavalier and to searching for an ideal twentieth-century southern identity with which to replace it."

But I for one do not find essential to modernism, or to Faulkner, the notion that the self is a provisional quantity, an unstable, fluid, and changing element continually redefined by experience. Yet repeatedly we find sentences like the following:

> There is, after all, no such thing as a generic human persona that remains the same in all times and places. On the contrary, Warren Susman informs us, the self is to a large extent historically determined, with each cultural era producing its own characteristic "modal" self as individuals construct their identities from the norms and prototypes that happen to be in circulation at the moment they come of age.

Is this indeed the case? Faulkner did not think so, nor do I. And of what authority in such matters, by the way, is Warren Susman, author of *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1984)?

The second idea that seems to inform this book is an impossibly vague notion of existentialism. Once in a while Singal identifies it with Reinhold Niehbuhr and Paul Tillich. All it seems to come down to is the idea of authenticity, but there is no adduced evidence that Faulkner read or knew of either author. Inasmuch as Singal has virtually nothing to say about it, neither shall I.

The third idea involves politics and modernism. Singal is disposed—as Irving Howe and Lionel Trilling were before him—to turn modernism into "an 'adversary culture' originating in bohemia but later adopted more generally by twentieth-century intellectuals in their estrangement from mass society." I have no objection to this identification as such. But I do object to an equation of the adversary culture with leftist politics. Most of the important literary modernists—as we see in the cases of Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Wyndham Lewis, E. E. Cummings, D. H. Lawrence, W. B. Yeats, et al.—were conservative in cultural and political matters. This won't do for Singal, who wishes to equate modernism

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with Communism, feminism, and radical integrationist politics.

This necessity of affirming leftist politics leads Mr. Singal to elevate one of Faulkner's most fatiguing novels, *The Mansion* (1959), into "the culminating example of modernist heroism in Faulkner." This novel is the third in the "Snopes Trilogy," after *The Hamlet* (1940) and *The Town* (1957). In Greenwich Village, "the citadel of American Modernism," Linda Snopes "enters into a passionate relationship with Barton Kohl, a young sculptor of Jewish descent and an ardent Communist. This 'virile, alive' man, 'who loved what the old Greeks meant by laughter,' completes her immersion in contemporary culture." Although Mr. Singal is sure that, "as a Modernist, she is aware that no immutable laws exist to govern behavior," she inevitably goes off to fight fascism in Spain. As much male as female, and therefore (for Singal) an embodiment of "heroic androgyny," she delivers herself of tedious and ungrammatical blather about "hope, millennium dream; of the emancipation of man from his tragedy, the liberation at last and forever from pain and hunger and injustice, of the human condition." Linda Snopes is for Singal "a female Christ" who,

> though a woman, a Communist, and, at least in name, a Snopes, . . . also represents Faulkner's final literary incarnation of his most revered ancestor [Colonel Falkner], the man whom he was still trying so hard to emulate in the late 1950s. A much improved, thoroughly Modernist version of the Old Colonel who preserves all his best attributes and reverses his defects, she is truly the Knight of the White Plume.

Readers are entitled to be thunderstruck, as I was, at the ease with which Linda Snopes, whom Cleanth Brooks called "an almost clinically pure example of a woman who is restless, alienated, and disturbed," is transformed into an incarnation of great-granddaddy and an exemplar of some kind of latent Communist strain in Faulkner. But it gets worse. Carried away with this wild nonsense, Singal goes on:

> Where the real-life Faulkner advocated gradualism and caution, the Modernist Faulkner was busy creating what at the time must have seemed the very model of an impatient militant, anticipating in an uncanny way that small legion of activists who in the 1960s would overthrow the South's oppressive racial traditions once and for all.

I shall pass over this bland assurance that the South's oppressive racial traditions have been permanently overthrown. And it would be cruel for me to probe this preposterous identification of Linda Snopes with Colonel Falkner. But it is plainly irresponsible in a work of literary criticism to identify the novelist with any of his characters, especially the deranged ones, and particularly with Linda Snopes. The Faulkner of the 1950s became increasingly conservative on racial matters, not merely taking a gradualist position on desegregation, but even holding the line and asserting that black and white Southerners needed to be left alone by the North to work out their own problems, which he was confident they would do. Far from being an embodiment of the leftist adversary culture, the novelist (taking an absolute states' rights position) remarked in 1956 that if it came to an invasion of Yankee marshals and detestable Northern civil rights workers, and "if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes."

Luckily for Faulkner, and for us, it never came to that, never came to another civil war because Southerners as a whole wisely understood the inherent justice of civil rights legislation and the necessity of obedience to the Constitution in matters of equal justice under the law. As to Faulkner, he was a child of his own time and place. He was descended from Victorians and steeped in the romance of a tragic but glorious Southern past. As a young man, he

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wanted—like most of us—to be awfully modern, but as he matured he found in the old ways much to affirm. These facts about the man and the novelist could have been explored and defined without creating a schizoid Faulkner or a prophet of Nineties academic political correctness. Singal has made him into both.

Two of the Eight

Bennard B. Perlman, editor
Revolutionaries of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri.
Princeton University Press,
350 pages, $35

reviewed by Michael J. Lewis

Robert Henri and his pupils were the most progressive painters in America—for all of five years. In 1908 Henri's Young Turks were the scourge of the art establishment, radicals who defiantly formed the Eight after being snubbed at the incestuous annual exhibit of the National Academy of Design. In 1913 they were conservative also-rans, whose submissions at New York's Armory Show revealed just how far America lagged behind the modernism of Europe. Such is the conventional view of American art history.

Of course, during this time the work of the Eight had changed not one bit. Its gritty realism still reeked of journalism and the pavement, which was after all its métier, reflecting the habits of men who had toiled as newspaper sketch artists and who had spent more time recording fires and arrests than in academic life study. During the 1890s, half of the future Eight had worked for Philadelphia dailies, where they learned to make forceful compositions out of the most unpromising subjects, and to do it swiftly and tersely. This training sank into their bones, and it is everywhere apparent in their subsequent paintings: William Glackens, who found his subjects at restaurants and race tracks; Everett Shinn, who lurked backstage at the ballet or in orchestra pits; George Luks, with his charmless renditions of livestock and heaving wrestlers, rotated to the least picturesque angle. But above all it was John Sloan whose urban vignettes earned the group the designation Ashcan School.[1]

Since at least 1934, when Holger Cahill and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., published *Art in America*, the Ashcan School has been recognized as a way station of modernism, though more so for its challenge to the academy than for its technique and subject matter. Its significance was purely transitional, a crucial link in the Darwinian chain of modernism before 1913, but afterwards irrelevant. Unfortunately, the Ashcan dinosaur refused to evolve—or to become extinct. Until Henri's death in 1929, he and Sloan continued to paint as they always had, making few concessions to changing fashions. This friendship, and the affectionate and whimsical correspondence that sustained it, is the subject of *Revolutionaries of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri*.

The two friends were quite different in temperament. Henri was a rough and tumble character, the son of a Nebraska real estate promoter who tangled repeatedly with cattlemen, shooting one to death in a brawl. The family fled and at the age of seventeen Robert Henry Cozad became Robert Henri (pronounced hen-rye), an alias he lived under for the rest of his life. Four years later, he entered the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and later studied at the Académie Julian, that Parisian stable for grooming would-be John Singer Sargents. Sloan was Henri's genteel foil: a shy bookstore cashier, he improvised an art education over a few semesters spent copying antique casts, which he detested. In rebellion he formed the short-lived Charcoal Club, a

1 The Eight also included three artists who cannot properly be considered Ashcan School painters, although they shared their frustration with the National Academy: Ernest Lawson, Arthur B. Davies, and Maurice Prendergast.

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cooperative group of young artists who paid a fee for a model and studio space; Henri agreed to serve as critic, cementing what was to be a lifelong friendship with Sloan.

The surviving correspondence is reproduced here in its entirety, with spare but highly useful editorial comments. (Or almost in its entirety; inexplicably a Sloan letter dated February 14, 1900, does not appear, although Bennard B. Perlman, the editor of this volume, quotes it in his excellent study *The Immortal Eight: American Painting from Eakins to the Armory Show*.) Moreover, Perlman handsomely reproduces almost every drawing or painting alluded to in the letters, and also reproduces in facsimile many of the letters and cards; almost nothing is left out. For a project of its kind, the book is a model of conscientiousness, yet, for all this, it remains somehow deeply unsatisfying. To understand why this is so is to glimpse the strengths and peculiar limitations of these profoundly un-Bohemian artists.

The letters reveal an intimate but unequal friendship. Like his restless father, Henri remained the itinerant cowboy, disappearing from town at will, often leaving Sloan in the lurch to handle the business accounts and pay his bills. In 1898, while in Paris, Henri received word that Sloan had moved in with "a common woman." His advice to his friend: "sometimes one has to run away to get out of such affairs." Sloan did not run way, and three years later married the woman. Henri, for his part, was always ready to run, and his most poignant flight came in 1913, following the Armory Show. Henri had every right to expect to be counted among the luminaries of the show, but when he was upstaged by the French and German modernists, he slipped into a funk. Fleeing to Ireland, he brooded for five months. Over the next two years, neither painter had much to communicate, and Henri's group, never a tightly organized band, fell apart. This episode, about which we want to know more, is a void which the book skips over.

Sloan was the less gifted artist, particularly weak in his figures, which remain rather generalized and amorphous. While his etchings were often quite strong tonal compositions, he never quite found freedom in oil painting. Even his best canvases, such as *Wake of the Ferry* or *Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair*, never fulfill the potential of fully realized oil compositions, and still have the air of illustration about them, something of a diagrammatic quality. What he knew of modern French painting came second hand, filtered through Henri. Still, he had a sharp eye for the group composition—the legacy of his newspaper days—and his work always retained its prying voyeurism, as he prowled tenement rooftops, peering over fire escapes to find his unwitting subjects. It is precisely this sensibility he passed on to Edward Hopper, who capitalized on the voyeurism, although he also inherited something of Sloan's slapdash brushwork.

Henri was the more successful artist, and understood better how to work within the limits of his ability. While in Paris in the 1890s, he learned to paint street scenes in a capable post-Impressionist manner, and with some success, selling his work *La Neige* to the French government in 1899. Returning to New York he strove to find an American counterpart to the Parisian scenes. He reinterpreted *La Neige* as *West 57th Street, New York* (1902), his finest urban view, only to give up the genre several years later. For the rest of his career, his work comprises chiefly portraits, full length at first, but by the 1910s nearly exclusively head-and-shoulder portraits, very often of children, whom he had a rare genius for putting at ease.

Against this backdrop the correspondence unfolds, not only tracing the artists' friendship but casting new light on their professional relationship. Sloan emerges as Henri's perennial student, deferring to him in matters artistic until the end. Henri's advice invariably ran in the same channel: to strip a composition down to its essence, and

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to maximize the pictorial vitality. When Sloan sent a photograph of his half-completed *East Entrance, City Hall, Philadelphia* (1901) for criticism, Henri immediately exhorted Sloan to "get the figures below to give as much of that eternal business of life—going in and coming out." Nearly two decades later he was still encouraging Sloan to pare down his details:

> You have an unusual gift of memory, both of sensations and sight, and while these years of more or less direct transcript—painting before the subject—may be considered the most excellent information gathering—and very useful—I'm quite certain your best work will come from dealing with the memories which have stuck with you after what is unessential—to you—in experiences have dropped away . . . There comes a time when it is better to have the model sit down behind you instead of in front so that you can go ahead.

Here we get a glimpse of what Henri must have been like as a studio critic—cajoling, extemporizing, entertaining (and also repeating himself, for he reiterates the same lesson nearly word for word elsewhere in the letter). There are also some arresting personal asides, such as Stuart Davis worrying about his draft number in World War I, or an account of watching Isadora Duncan dance. Likewise, there are tales of the artists' colony in Santa Fe, which both men (and their friend George Bellows) adopted as a kind of second home in the late Teens.

All this is engaging and highly readable, for both artists were witty letter writers. Nonetheless, the letters do not quite tell a continuous story, which readers will find frustrating; the correspondence is intermittent and sketchy, flaring into life when the artists were separated, then falling silent, usually just as things are getting interesting. But it is when it comes to talking about their own art that these voluble letter writers disappoint most.

Toward the end of his life, Henri organized his thoughts into *The Art Spirit* (1923), as much an inspirational sermon as a manual for the aspiring artist. A good portion of the book was given over to suggestions for how technique and artistic expression might be harmonized, which was perhaps the central concern of Henri's teaching. In one characteristic passage he urged portrait painters to see the eyebrow as a single expressive line, and to paint it fluidly, rather than to fuss over the individual hairs. Such no-nonsense pronouncements, always with a practical application, are the closest Henri ever came to explaining his philosophy of painting.

Even in a torrent of words, as there is in these letters, one misses any sense, even a hint, of an inner life. And all the excellent visual material that accompanies the letters cannot make up for this gap. The truth is, these high-spirited, infectiously cheerful artists were not deeply introspective. They seldom thought in abstract terms, and they never strayed near even the outermost precincts of theory. If their painting was modern, it was a modernism without program, depending for its meaning upon no manifesto or explicit ideological program. Nor did it rest on a political platform. Sloan may have dabbled in leftist politics and been a socialist by conviction, contributing to the radical magazine *The Masses*, but his paintings remain strikingly apolitical. While it is virtually a physical impossibility for a modern viewer to stand in front of a Sloan work and speak about it for sixty seconds without lapsing into a commentary on social issues, Sloan had quite different intentions. For all his political engagement, he painted with the neutral, appraising eye of the reporter. He was not, however, a muckraker: like Degas, who used the accidental poses of his faceless ballerinas and bathers to explore abstract form, Sloan presented his hairdressers and shop girls as a way of exploring the city, not reforming it.

And here is the paradox that runs through the careers of Henri and Sloan. In every sense, they were products of Quaker Philadelphia, a profoundly anti-theoretical city whose tradition was empiricism in the sciences and humanities, and realism in the

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arts. The scientific realism of Thomas Eakins dominated the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts long after his own unhappy tenure, and Henri and Sloan were marinated in it. They were Academy realists, even as they struggled against it, and they absorbed its unquestioned belief in the observed world as the central subject of art.

At the same time, they were products of Paris, the Paris of the 1890s, which gave them their technique and their attitude. They admired and borrowed from Cézanne and the post-Impressionists. Rejecting Eakins's airless brushwork, they learned to paint wet, and to make thick descriptive brush strokes that rose to turbulent impasto. Out of these two sources they cobbled their artistic identity. Thus they painted modern life, believing themselves therefore to be modernists. When they drew up their barricades against the tyranny of the academy and arbiters of taste like Kenyon Cox, they saw their enemy on the right; and when they were outflanked in 1913 on their left, they were rather bewildered, the orphaned Mensheviks of the artistic revolution.

By making them into modernists, and then pronouncing them as failures, critics such as Barr engaged in polemical sleight-of-hand. The goal of Henri's group was not a radical break with the past, but reform from within, and they should not be judged for failing to follow through on what was never their intention. Nor were they the only artists in the world who found themselves in this position. This was particularly true of artists in Germany, which also tended to absorb radical French ideas rapidly, while buffering them with the weight of well-established, indigenous traditions. It is against these artists that Henri and Sloan ought to be measured, not Kandinsky, but older German masters such as Lovis Corinth and Max Slevogt, who are likewise now in the process of an overdue reassessment.

This is the tragedy of Henri and Sloan, but it also makes them far more interesting painters than those fickle young counterparts of theirs who immediately leapt onto the Armory bandwagon. If their correspondence shows a scarcity of theoretical calculation, it is offset by their rollicking self-confidence. And surely, after all, it was this very indifference to theory and fashion that inoculated them from much of the shallow faddism that rent American modernism in the wake of the Armory Show, when an armada's worth of canvas was sacrificed for pale pastiches of Duchamp, Matisse, and Picabia.

Period ironies

Thomas Pynchon Mason & Dixon. Henry Holt, 773 pages, $27.50

reviewed by Brooke Allen

Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* provides ample proof, if further proof be needed, that the most profound story in Western literature—at least so far as our cultural life is concerned—is the one about the emperor and his new clothes. It has always seemed to me that if someone writes a novel that is long, obscure, and pretentious enough, the fashionable world will rise in a body and proclaim it a masterpiece, and this is exactly what happened with Pynchon's eight-hundred-page, all-but unreadable tome.

Henry Holt's peppy marketing team has characterized the book with grotesque inaccuracy as being reader-friendly, a happy "buddy" story accessible not only to Pynchon-nerds but to the common reader, whoever he or she might be. Fawning reviews in the daily *New York Times*, the *Times Book Review*, and *The New York Review of Books* supported that specious claim, and sales boomed, making *Mason & Dixon* one of the most unlikely bestsellers of all time. I don't know whether I qualify as a common reader, but I found the novel to be aggressively inaccessible, not only to myself but to each of the various highly educated people whose opinions I solicited. It's not that any of us would be ultimately incapable of

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knuckling down and penetrating the gauze of obfuscation in which Pynchon delights to shroud every scene; but then again, why would we want to? The rewards are not commensurate with the effort, and there are far too many really interesting books one might be reading instead.

Mason & Dixon, much like John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, is a mock-eighteenth-century novel. That means it conforms loosely with the stylistic conventions of the day and is rich with period spellings and dialogue, rhetorical sallies, and decorative bombast. The problem is that Pynchon has adopted only the annoying qualities—the verbosity, the digressiveness, the repetitions and affectations—of the genre and left out its freshness, energy, and outrageousness. This is the kind of prose that results:

> "Sirs, attend me," the coins having silently vanish'd, "— Since last year, the Year of Marvels, when Hawke drove Conflans upon that lee shore at Quiberon Bay, the remnants of the Brest fleet have been understandably short of *Elan*, or *Esprit*, or whatever they style that stuff over there,— excepting, now and then, among the Captains of smaller Frigates, souls as restless to engage in personal Tactics as dispos'd to sniff at national Strategy. Mortmain, Le Chisel, St.-Foux,— mad dogs all,— any of them, and others, likely at any time to set sail out from Brest, indifferent to Risk, *tête-à-tête* as ever with the end of the World, seeking new Objects of a Resentment inexhaustible."

It's archaic all right, but no reader of *Mason & Dixon* would be likely to mistake it for real eighteenth-century writing. Aside from the fact that Pynchon slips in countless self-conscious anachronisms, the novel is too full of the telltale intellectual sin of our own age: compulsive irony. Pynchon's unrelenting irony makes *Mason & Dixon* a very postmodern piece of work.

Mason & Dixon tells Pynchon's version of the story of Charles Mason (1728–1786) and Jeremiah Dixon (1733–1779), the British astronomers and surveyors best remembered in the United States for having established the boundary line between Pennsylvania and Maryland. It is narrated by a skeptical Philadelphia parson, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, who as a young man accompanied the astronomers on their several joint expeditions, and his asides to the young people listening to his tale give the author the opportunity to slip in a few wry, ironic takes on the self-delusion of Christianity, the irrationality of Reason, and the vanity inherent in the pursuit of knowledge.

The melancholy widower Mason, assistant to the astronomer royal at Greenwich, is sent with his second, the more jovial (albeit Quaker) Dixon, to observe the transit of Venus in Sumatra. Their ship is attacked by the French navy and the astronomers are rerouted to the Cape of Good Hope, where they stay for some time, observing not only the transit but the strange life of the Cape's white and black populations. From there they proceed to the island of St. Helena and eventually to the North American colonies, where they are hired to establish the boundary that will eventually become the Mason-Dixon line.

In America, Mason and Dixon, naïf picaros, take in the sights and meet the celebrities. In Philadelphia, they come across Benjamin Franklin and assist with some of his scientific experiments; in Virginia they meet up with Colonel George Washington, who is more interested in real estate than in politics and possesses a Jewish-African slave who performs schticky borscht-belt routines for his master's guests. They also encounter another Virginian, a tall young redhead, who eavesdrops on their conversation and asks whether he might use Dixon's throwaway remark about "the pursuit of happiness" in his future writings.

They find political malcontents and revolutionaries aplenty, but true to Pynchon's unrelentingly revisionist project these turn out to be nothing more than unsavory riff-raff. And they also become enmeshed in a wholly absurd Sino-Jesuit conspiracy: the well-known Pynchon paranoia, this time in eighteenth-century terms. Describing the

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journey to his grandchildren, Cherrycoke recalls that

> what we were doing out in that Country together was brave, scientifick beyond my understanding, and ultimately meaningless,— we were putting a line straight into the heart of the Wilderness, eight yards wide and due west, in order to separate two Proprietorships, granted when the World was yet feudal and but eight years later to be nullified by the War for Independence.

Postmodern writers and theorists love to play with the notion of meaninglessness, and *Mason & Dixon*'s principal and most exhaustively belabored irony is that the Age of Reason, of which the surveyors are representatives, was anything but reasonable. During the course of their travels the men of science are forced to confront an articulate and learned dog; a mechanical duck who begs its inventor for an erotic life; a were-beaver; an ear which, though severed from its head, continues to hear; and an assortment of religious enthusiasts from German Pietists to Bavarian Rosicrucians.

"I may be præternatural, but I am not supernatural," says the talking dog. "'Tis the Age of Reason, rrrf? There is ever an Explanation at hand, and no such thing as a Talking Dog." We get the point; we get it again five pages later; and we get it each of the many times it is made as the novel wears slowly on.

Of course, the talking dog and the severed ear are not just a talking dog and a severed ear: they are symbols for the larger irrationality of "reasonable" human society, in particular the institution of slavery. The three territories to which Mason and Dixon travel together, South Africa, St. Helena, and America, are all slave societies, where whites "are become the very Savages of their own worst Dreams, far out of Measure to any Provocation." The guileless astronomers observe the depredations of slavery with horror. Mason, for example, is shocked when the women of the Boer family with whom he boards at Cape Town urge their luscious slave woman, aptly named Austra, to slip into his bed at night; it seems that an African child sired by a white man will fetch a great price at the slave auctions. America, Dixon points out, was the one place they should *not* have found slaves (though this is in itself an anachronistic notion: during Mason and Dixon's time America was not yet the self-styled cradle of democracy but an assortment of European colonies).

But America as metaphor has always been irresistible to intellectuals, and Pynchon goes to town with it.

> Does Britannia, when she sleeps, dream? Is America her dream? — in which all that cannot pass in the metropolitan Wakefulness is allow'd Expression away in the restless Slumber of these Provinces, and on West-ward, wherever 'tis not yet mapp'd, nor written down, nor ever, by the majority of Mankind, seen,— serving as a very Rubbish-Tip for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*,— Earthly Paradise, Fountain of Youth, Realms of Prester John, Christ's Kingdom, ever behind the sunset, safe till the next Territory to the West be seen and recorded, measur'd and tied in, back into the Net-Work of Points already known, that slowly triangulates its Way into the Continent, changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities that serve the ends of Governments,— winning away from the realm of the Sacred, its Borderlands one by one, and assuming them unto the bare mortal World that is our home, and our Despair.

The fact that he has created heroes who are somewhat innocent, easily shocked by the naked inequities of the society they are visiting, allows the ever-ironic Pynchon to pile irony upon irony. Mason and Dixon, early examples of the "bleeding heart liberal," were to give their names to the infamous boundary dividing the slave-holding Southern states from the free northern ones. The Mason-Dixon line thus became an integral element in the ugly history of American race-relations.

The problem with all of this is that Pyn-

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chon has taken a genuinely interesting topic and turned it into a Pynchon novel. Again and again during the long and weary course of *Mason & Dixon*, I found my interest piqued by some passing observation, and wished that the volume I was reading provided a trustworthy guide to the heroes' historical period and their engineering feat, both fascinating in themselves. What a marvelous piece of nonfiction a book about Mason and Dixon might make! If only Robert A. Caro or Shelby Foote had written this story!

Instead, and in spite of the demonstrably extensive historical knowledge he has acquired while writing *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon shows himself to be less in love with his subject than he is with his own talent and intellect. Every potentially acute historical observation is turned into a silly Pynchonesque joke, every event seen through the lens of smug postmodern irony and contemporary political cliché. In the end, *Mason & Dixon* turns out to be a self-regarding stylistic exercise without sincerity or passion—and monumentally boring to boot. All its author has succeeded in doing by dressing it up in the garb of the age of Fielding is to expose the fatuity and self-indulgence of the age of Pynchon.

Monsieur Moi-même

Jonathan Keates Stendhal.
Carroll & Graf, 478 pages, $28

reviewed by Daniel J. Silver

Henri Beyle, better known to us by his pseudonym, Stendhal, was called by the French *un homme singulier*, or what we might call, with an inevitable loss of nuance, a character. And he was, indeed, the most singular of all the great nineteenth-century French novelists, and also perhaps the most contradictory. Unlike Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, his peers in the pantheon of fiction, he had an amateur's approach to literature, and except for some youthful dreams, never strove to be a professional writer. His detractors would say that it showed. Not a few of his readers would become fed up with his desultory style, lack of narrative drive, overindulgence in asides, and his affectation of unsentimental detachment from the fate of his characters. A pretty fair judge of the art, Henry James pronounced *Le Rouge et le noir* to be unreadable, yet he was enthralled by *La Chartreuse de Parme*, showing the strange mix of emotions that can be evoked even within the same reader by this great figure of French letters.

It marks some of his distinction that Stendhal should elicit wildly varying and even troubled reactions, as did Beyle in person, at the salons, as he expatiated on every subject under the sun, blithely ignoring his own ignorance. None of which is to say that his work was without craft, or to deny that he was, in fact, extraordinarily learned. But it is noteworthy that his singular spirit and idiosyncrasy animated both man and work so completely that it is almost inconceivable to think of one without thinking of the other.

It is certainly in the hope of showing the rich veins of this idiosyncrasy and the pleasures of being reacquainted with such a lively character that Jonathan Keates, a British man of letters, has undertaken this brilliant biography. This is the first life of Stendhal in English in a quarter-century (the most comprehensive treatments are French, the most recent being published in 1990), and it is hard to imagine one being written to eclipse the sensitivity and acuteness of Keates's work, or one that would give greater pleasure to the reader, with its combination of lovely magisterial prose and piquant, earthy wit—not unlike that of Beyle himself. The greatest tribute, I think, is to note that in Keates's portrait Beyle lives and breathes as a credible person posed against a richly textured historical background that also comes to life.

Like all of the other truly great writers of that century, Beyle was the product of bourgeois ambition deflected from its original aim. He was born Marie-Henri

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Beyle in 1783 in the provincial city of Grenoble, a place he came to detest and mock as the very type of philistine commercialism and mean-spirited provinciality (surely touches of this feeling make their way into *Le Rouge et le noir*'s ugly portrayal of Julien Sorel's birthplace). To put it simply, as simply and candidly as he himself would later put it, he loved his mother and hated his father. His mother died in childbirth when Henri was merely seven, and he would never forgive his father, aside from his other demerits, for failing to provide any substitute for his beloved, comforting *maman*. His father was a lawyer with ambitions in municipal politics and an outlook fixed on commercial advantage. Unfortunately, his rigidity and charmlessness, apparently cultivated in part to mold himself into a great striver, left only a chill of isolation on his sensitive son, while his monetary ambitions, owing possibly to acute incompetence, never panned out.

Henri felt tortured by his father's lectures, early intimations of that total dousing of inner spirit that the later writer would come to associate with the cult of business enterprise and the reactionary legitimism of post-Napoleonic Europe. Henri wept with joy twice in his childhood, once at the premature death of his hated, repressive maiden aunt, who tried to take over the motherly duties, and at the execution of the King—both moments obviously symbols of liberation. But as Keates is surely right to observe, these little glimpses of the monster within young Beyle, though portents of his later outrageousness, did not coincide with a revolutionary temperament. Beyle shed no tears for the proletariat, as he found the Jacobins he met to be just a bunch of scruffy, self-important fools and lowlifes.

Like young Julien Sorel, young Beyle did well in school and looked to scholastic achievement as a means of escape from other, more onerous, bourgeois duties. Adept at mathematics, he passed the entrance exam for the Parisian Ecole Polytechnique, where he could advance to a scientific or engineering career; but after being sent off to Paris he unaccountably failed to enroll. Instead, residing under the patronage of his well-connected cousin, Pierre Daru, one of Napoleon's ablest administrators, Henri was given a commission to the Grand Armée. Daru saw to it that Henri would see little or no real action, but his largely clerical duties paved the way for further advancement, as he would become a commissary, or provisions officer, to Napoleon's army—in which role he earned distinction, particularly during the disastrous Russian campaign, when he helped his unit survive the horrendous winter.

More than any other experiences, his travels with the army were to enlarge his sensibility and decisively shape the kind of intellectual and writer he would become. It was on his first trip to the Lombard region of Italy, and his encounter with the great city of Milan, that he fell in love with Italy, the warmth of its people and landscape so different from grubby Grenoble. He also became enchanted by the *opera buffa* or comic opera he attended at La Scala. This experience launched his first literary ambitions, as he tried without success—like many another great prose writer of the century, including Henry James—to be a librettist and dramatist.

Waterloo and the Bourbon restoration did their part, by removing any immediate prospects of government advancement, to form Beyle into the freelance intellectual, Baron de Stendhal, as he would sometimes style himself—partly from the practical need to hide his true identity from royalist Ultras offended at the promiscuous irreverence of his writing (despite his precautions, the Austrian authorities, suspicious of his liberal sympathies, kicked him out of Italy in 1821), but also to will into being a fanciful new identity through which he was free to explore his creative imagination. This new Beyle would become a critic and *salonnier* extraordinaire, discoursing about all the arts, writing for various magazines, and frequenting the most sophisticated houses in Paris and Milan. He would always prefer

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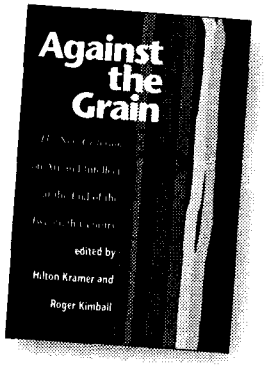
Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



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the Milanese crowd because of their playful spirit of passionate inquiry, rather than the often spiteful gamesmanship of high Parisian culture. Yet he was no mean game player himself, and would expound his unorthodox opinions in the face of all comers, no matter how impolitic; this won him, understandably, a number of enemies as well as some fascinated admirers and a handful of loyal friends. The frankly admiring Keates does not hide from us Stendhal's petulance or his unbecoming tendency to badmouth his friends, at least in his journals, where he would record every weakness he saw in others—though no less so his own.

Aside from his occasional journalism, Stendhal also managed to compose several more substantial pieces that drew attention: in particular, a survey of Italian painting, and a life of Rossini—both works larded generously with his own odd judgments and effusions of *sensibility* refracted through whatever the ostensible subject happened to be; it was not for nothing that even Stendhal could refer to himself as Monsieur Moi-même—no writer of the century would be as candid and as candidly self-involved. But surely the works by which he will still be known into the next century are his extraordinary novels, even if he only finished two. We have already mentioned their defects in the eyes of some—and, to be sure, during his life the novels were to be received at best with polite interest.

It is safe to say that in his obsessive attention to detail, encapsulated nonetheless in a deliberately flat, unrhetorical and unpoetic prose, Stendhal was ahead of his time—for better or worse. Whatever one thinks of the style there are a couple of salient features of his fiction that are undeniable: an acute intelligence shown in his fascination with ideas, even those he despised, and the creation of some of the most magnificent women characters in fiction, who combine passion and sensuality with wit and learning rarely accorded to his men. The latter were in part drawn from life: the frustrated, lifelong bachelor Beyle may never have achieved the felicity of pro-

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longed union with a true soul mate, but he had many fascinating affairs and long intimate friendships with powerful and brilliant women. Such figures as Mathilde, Mademoiselle de la Mole, from *Le Rouge et le noir*, and the Duchess Sanseverina and Clelia from *La Chartreuse de Parme* would not have been possible without Beyle's amorous friendships, but with their thrilling intelligence and unpredictable natures—the *frisson* created by their air of moral improvisation—they glow on the page unquestionably through Stendhal's genius.

With the accession of the July Monarchy in 1830, and a new tolerance for liberalism, Beyle's hopes for comfortable circumstances were once again to be rewarded, again through family connections, and he was given a consulship to his beloved Italy; but owing to continued Hapsburg suspicions he was ultimately posted to the safe yet hopelessly dull, uncultivated Civitavecchia, old capital of the Papal States. He did not exactly thrive there, but it was a productive time for his literary work, as he composed much of the very promising though unfinished *Lucien Leuwen*, a couple of autobiographical sketches, and then, in a white heat of mad scribbling for six weeks late in 1838, *La Chartreuse de Parme*. Then his health began to fail, but as he was able to exercise his restless intelligence almost to the very end, Keates avers, and it is a comforting thought one would like to believe, that he found a new kind of peace with himself. He was felled by a second stroke and died in March 1842. Cynical to the end, he thought it unlikely he would be much missed. Happily, he was wrong.

Shorter notices

A. J. A. Symons The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography. Ecco Press, 293 pages, $15

In 1925, A. J. A. Symons came across a peculiar novel called *Hadrian the Seventh* and, transfixed by the tale, determined to learn everything he could about its even stranger author. He finally published his findings nine years later as *The Quest for Corvo,* a singular book now handsomely reissued.

Modestly subtitled *An Experiment in Biography*, *The Quest for Corvo* still stands as one of the genre's most notable—if also quirkiest—triumphs. The experiment to which Symons alluded had several parts. First, he set out to reconstruct, largely by inquiring letters, the wretched life of a shadowy, already half-forgotten man who had died twelve years earlier, leaving few fingerprints. Second, he decided that, far from obliterating the traces of his sleuthwork, the hunt itself—along with its dead ends and frustrations—was to be woven into the narrative. Third, and perhaps trickiest of all, he resolved to garner for his subject at least a modicum of sympathy. This last may not sound particularly new or daring, except that Symons's subject just happened to have been, to a degree surpassing even Dr. Johnson's acquaintance Richard Savage, a figure of almost preternatural odiousness.

That contemptible creature was one Frederick William Rolfe, a.k.a. Fr. Rolfe and, more glamorously, Baron Corvo. Born in 1860, Rolfe aspired in his early years to priest- and painterhood, but was scotched in both ambitions. At literature, he proved more successful, attracting a small yet refined and cultish readership to his atavistic, extravagantly mannered fictions and histories, which include (in addition to the semi-autobiographical *Hadrian the Seventh) Stories Toto Told Me* and *Chronicles of the House of Borgia*. The talented Rolfe might have enjoyed a quaint, cozy career as writer's writer, or as darling to ecclesiastical aesthetes, had he not possessed equal gifts for self-sabotage and the souring of friendships. No publisher who dealt with Rolfe escaped unmauled; his co-authors (among them Robert Hugh Benson, who collaborated with Rolfe on a life of St. Thomas) endured scalding baptisms of bile.

Add to Rolfe's genius for scurrility three bushels of garden-variety paranoia. He be-

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lieved in particular that Catholics, from whose sacerdotal fold he'd been excluded, conspired gleefully to keep him down. In point of fact, many were—as Symons's research makes clear—amazingly tolerant and solicitous of Rolfe in the fine English way. But no matter: Rolfe's mythology demanded that he play the hounded martyr. A drearily predictable pattern took hold, wherein Rolfe would cozen some naïve admirer into helping him, turn nastily on the poor Samaritan, and then split town, lobbing vituperative letters over his shoulder like hand grenades.

At last, in 1908, Rolfe was driven—or, rather, drove himself—into exile in Venice. There he liberally broadened his routine of mooching, outraging, litigation, and epistolary abuse to include wholesale predation on the city's rent boys; like an unholy hybrid of Byron, Aschenbach, and Pasolini or William S. Burroughs, Rolfe put a late, pederastic twist on the figure of the Englishman in Venice. This did little to endear him to the local expatriates, and Rolfe's *roman à clef* razzing their colony did not improve matters. When, after having degenerated, almost literally, into a water rat, the pariah finally died in 1913, a collective sigh of British relief must have risen from the canals.

In short, Frederick Rolfe amounted to what an earlier age would have called a scoundrel or a blackguard; our own would doubtless resort to more anatomically vivid epithets. Nor (*pace* Symons) was his life quite justified by his art. True, Rolfe's letters are perverse masterpieces of invective, sufficiently withering to make a Parisian take pause. But much Corvine prose is nearly undigestible; an overcooked, laboriously antique confection studded with jawbreaking coinages like "turpilucricupidous," it reads as if Robert Burton, Ronald Firbank, and the bulls of some especially bombastic pontiff had been scrambled together.

So why bother with *The Quest for Corvo*? To begin, because Rolfe's a fascinating freak, an insoluble tangle of skills (others include photography and gorgeous penmanship), asperities, maladies, and odd anachronisms; as Symons put it, Rolfe "suffered from that nostalgia of the past which, of all temptations of the mind, is the most destructive to contentment." Perhaps a greater reason, though, is that the creepiness of Rolfe is everywhere offset by his auditor's wit and charm. In happy contrast to the anfractuous Corvine style, Symons's ripples sparklingly along, laced with the lightest of ironies. Ditto that of Symons's correspondents, whose transmissions account for much of the book: uniformily eloquent and delightful, these obscure missive-mates remind us of just how widespread—and how well practiced—the art of letter writing once was. It's almost enough, these faxed-up days, to tip one into that fatal veneration of bygones from which the Purple Baron suffered and drew.

—Ben Downing

David Baker, editor Meter in English: A Critical Engagement. University of Arkansas Press, 368 pages, $38; $20 paper

If it is true that in art only technical matters can be taught, then the evidence of *Meter in English* suggests that, despite a revival in formal verse, our graduate programs in poetry are teaching very little indeed. This book brings together the responses of fourteen distinguished poets and teachers to a target essay, in the form of ten propositions, by poet and teacher Ronald Wallace; it ends with a long reply by Wallace to his respondents.

Unfortunately, Wallace muddles things from the start, and his confusion infects virtually all the essays that follow. Ironically, his first mistake is one of form. Trying to strong-arm his complex subject into simple axioms, Wallace hands down ten pedantic boldface commandments. These range from whingeing terminological quibbles, "Instead of the term 'feminine ending' we should say simply extra-syllable ending," to bafflingly obvious statements, "The spon-

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dee [a foot of two long stresses] is a good, and fairly frequent foot in English." Though he may not realize it, Wallace is no Moses, leading the less enlightened masses into a land of prosodic clarity. He'd do better breaking his rigid tablets.

Far more damning than the form of his argument is its content. From the outset, Wallace fails to make two fundamental distinctions, the lack of which renders his observations precisely useless. First, he does not distinguish between prosody as description and prosody as prescription. The importance of this is evident in his last proposition. Does he mean spondees are "good," which is to say acceptable for poets to employ when writing? In that case let's all rejoice that Ronald Wallace has come along to tell us it is "good" to do what poets have been doing for the last five centuries or so. Or is the spondee "good" and "frequent" in the sense that it accurately describes what we hear when we read poetry? Wallace himself provides no answer. Second, when writing about individual poems, Wallace never distinguishes between speech stress (accents as we actually hear them) and metrical ictus (the ideal accents that the meter causes us to expect). That almost none of the book's contributors notices these basic errors in Wallace's essay, I find especially disturbing. In fact, many of the essayists do nothing more than express bland agreement with Wallace's key points. Just how bad has our thinking about prosody become?

No less an authority than Robert Hass, our Poet Laureate, entertains the notion that accentual-syllabic meters are "the principal way in which the educated classes in Europe mystified their utterance and gave it repressive authority, which they called poetry." Just think of the oppressed people who would have been liberated had Wordsworth only written free verse instead of sonnets! Someone ought to tell our laureate that this sort of ranting went out of fashion with berets and bongos.

Though he denies it when responding to his critics, Wallace alternately confuses and misuses the terms meter and rhythm. Rhythm is not, as Wallace avers, *merely* the tension between speech stress (what he calls "speech run") and metrical ictus. Compounded of syntax, diction, lineation, and rhyme, as well as meter (or the metrical tension described above), rhythm is the broadest of categories. That is why no two iambic (or trochaic) poems will have the same rhythm: Pope's "Rape of the Lock" and Wordworth's *Prelude* are both in iambic pentameter, yet their rhythms are entirely different. But Wallace needs to fudge the line between meter and rhythm in order to make his central and most egregious claim: that there is only one meter in English poetry, and it is iambic. All other meters, say trochaic or anapestic or dactylic, "do not exist in English." They are "*sub*-meters." Furthermore, he believes that "iambic and trochaic, anapestic and dactylic *rhythms* [my emphasis] are mirror image and . . . indistinguishable from one another as meter." These meters may be construed as symmetrical, or indistinguishable, on the page and in theory, but the ear easily discerns a trochaic from an iambic.

Having already decided that all English poetry is iambic, Wallace replaces the notion of meter with the term *rhythm* in order to discuss those troubling "sub-meters." Thus, in his scheme Blake's "Tyger" becomes an iambic poem with a trochaic rhythm. He refuses to listen to the falling meter of the poem:

x / x / x / x
Tyger Tyger burning bright
x / x / x / x
in the forest of the night

Because it is permissable to imagine an unstressed syllable at the beginning of these lines, Wallace argues that the poem is iambic tetrameter with a trochaic rhythm. It is not. Anyone with an ear can hear that this is a poem composed of trochees. Again, our prosody must accurately present what we hear when we read a poem, either silently or aloud.

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For a corrective to Wallace's more misguided proclamations, one must turn to the essays by Dana Gioia, John Frederick Nims, Lewis Putnam Turco, and Timothy Steele. Gioia has a strong grasp of prosody's history; he employs forceful examples of verse, and, unlike Wallace, he doesn't try to analyze single lines out of context. Nims and Gioia are virtually the only contributors with pleasing prose styles; the rest proceed in a scholarly shuffle. Turco alone substantively addresses the issue of "free verse," and Steele, in his excellent essay, is the only writer in the book who clearly distinguishes between prescriptive and descriptive prosody, speech stress and metrical ictus.

While others in the collection make useful points too numerous to list here, as a coherent look at its subject, *Meter in English* fails. On the other hand, it has succeeded in stressing to me just how poorly our poets and teachers understand the complexities of poetic meter.

—*Daniel Kunitz*

We mourn the passing of William H. Jordy

1917–1997

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Letters

Open letter

To the Editors:
I feel compelled to respond to the open letter about Joseph Epstein published in your May 1997 issue. What I find most surprising, and also most depressing, about that letter is the extent to which fourteen defenders of literary and scholarly standards have departed from precisely those standards.

In saying this, I do not particularly have in mind the fact that Phi Beta Kappa is misspelled in the very first sentence of the letter. My hunch is that this was the work of a printer that somehow escaped the attention of the editors; in that case, only the last two signers of the letter bear any responsibility.

What I do very much have in mind, however, is the flagrant and surely deliberate misquoting of my words in the letter's second paragraph. Your fourteen distinguished authors quote me as having written (*The Key Reporter*, Fall 1996) that "22 years is quite a long time and that [a] periodic change[s] of editors could bring new points of view and fresh ideas to the *Scholar*." What is *not* quoted is either the beginning or the end of the sentence from which those words were taken, nor am I accorded even the courtesy of an ellipsis at the end of your "quotation" to indicate the deletion. I hope you will be good enough to allow me to quote the entire sentence here, leaving your readers to decide whether I was expressing my own views or those of others:

> I believe, for example, that the simple proposition that 22 years is quite a long time and that a periodic change of editors could bring new points of view and fresh ideas to the *Scholar* determined the votes of a number of my colleagues.

Having long had considerable respect for *The New Criterion*, I am shocked that it would publish, and its distinguished editor would subscribe to, such an egregious distortion.

Finally, having always believed that scholarly discourse should be marked by some degree of modesty when predicting the unpredictable, I find such phrases as "PBK is certain to be trading intelligent readability for the various kinds of ideological axe-grinding that distorts so many academic journals today" and "we certainly have no reason to suppose that his appointed successor . . . is likely to achieve such distinction" jarring. To paraphrase a marvelous British statement from an earlier century, I wish I could be as sure of anything as the authors of the open letter are of everything.

Because I have a deep aversion to the public airing of the private deliberations of boards and committees, particularly when they concern individuals (an exception made even in the Freedom of Information Act), I have deliberately avoided discussing in any but the most general way the Phi Beta Kappa Senate's lengthy and occasionally heated debate about the editorship of *The American Scholar*. Nor have I revealed my own position in that debate beyond writing in the same issue of *The Key Reporter* (mis)quoted in your open letter that ". . . Joseph Epstein is a brilliant editor, a brilliant essayist, and a man of

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strong convictions. Because he chose not to make the *Scholar* a bland and timid publication that avoided controversy, he earned both ardent admirers and severe critics. . . ."

Because of the controversy that has come to surround the Senate's decision to extend Joe Epstein's term for two rather than three years, I feel that I have no choice now but to say a word about my own position. As anyone who was present will affirm, I did everything of which I was capable to support Joe and to persuade my colleagues to extend his term for the full three years he desired. Unfortunately, I was out-voted, but happily I was able with the help of many other senators to head off much more draconian measures suggested by some senators. (One of those senators was so outraged by what she perceived as the unprincipled cowardice of the final decision that she tendered her resignation on the spot.)

I defer to no one in my admiration for Joseph Epstein and for his stewardship of *The American Scholar*. If I do not view this whole unfortunate episode as "a calamity for American letters," it is because I am sure that he will find other outlets for his prodigious talents and, unlike the signatories of the letter, I have high hopes that his carefully chosen successor will also achieve great distinction.

Charles Blitzer
President of the Phi Beta Kappa Society
Washington, D.C.

The Editors reply:
It is amusing to observe Charles Blitzer, who as president of Phi Beta Kappa presided over the organization's dismissal of Joseph Epstein from the editorship of *The American Scholar*, attempting to portray himself as a noncombatant in the culture wars. What is less amusing, and indeed contemptible, is his continued refusal to acknowledge that the termination of Mr. Epstein's editorship at *The American Scholar* was a flat-out political mugging. Mr. Epstein was found by the ideological hotheads in the Phi Beta Kappa hierarchy to be guilty of the crime of political incorrectness. That was the one and only issue that precipitated this scandal. Everyone in the Phi Beta Kappa bureaucracy knows this—it was, after all, what the political commissars at Phi Beta Kappa had been attempting to accomplish for several years—and Mr. Blitzer knows it, too. But to admit to the blatantly political character of Mr. Epstein's dismissal would have been a public embarrassment for an organization that still pretends to abide by the liberal tenets on which it was founded. Hence Mr. Blitzer's pathetic recourse to anodyne euphemisms about "new points of view" or "fresh ideas." The fact is, there is nothing either "new" or "fresh" about the politically correct ideas that Mr. Epstein was accused of flouting in *The American Scholar* and in his contributions to other publications. They are now the stale ideological debris of the American academy, and it was his refusal to disfigure the pages of *The American Scholar* with that debris that caused Mr. Epstein's dismissal. This was what "the Phi Beta Kappa's lengthy and occasionally heated debate about the editorship of *The American Scholar*" was really about, and for Mr. Blitzer to pretend otherwise violates the plain facts of the case.

Stonewall Jackson slept here

To the Editors:
I read in "Stonewall Jackson Slept Here" (Theater, May 1997): "Instead of the real-life Bentley and Mailer, Reynolds introduces us to Oz and Gaby, husband and wife," which almost makes Norman Mailer and myself husband and wife in a play by Jonathan Reynolds.

How come? Your man—Mark Steyn—explains that Mr. Reynolds's play was read at the Actors Studio "in front of Eric Bentley, Elia Kazan, Norman Mailer, and others. They loathed the play, pronounced it racist, demanded to know what right a white man had to write in the voice of a black woman, etc."

Startling reading for me, as I have never in my life questioned the right of any man to write in the voice of anyone whatever, and have myself written roles for black women . . . I might continue in this vein, but more pertinent is that I have no memory of being present at all on the occasion cited. In the few visits I did make to the Actors Studio to see plays or hear readings, I certainly never expressed loathing thereat,

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"pronounced" anything "racist," or "demanded to know" anything. And I wonder about Kazan, that isn't *his* style either. As for Mailer, why don't you ask him?

Eric Bentley
New York, N.Y.

The Smithsonian today

To the Editors:

There are two principal ways to approach an investigation of a human institution like the Smithsonian. One is to bathe oneself in the complexities and multiple programs of the institution, keeping an open mind and striving to report in a cogent and organized way what one has found. The other is to investigate in a selective way—normally in relationship to a strongly held philosophical view. Those who are accused of so-called political correctness are charged with organizing their quests and results solely through the litmus of class, gender, and race.

Heather Mac Donald in her article "Revisionist Lust: The Smithsonian Today" (May 1997) fits in the camp of the selective perceiver. Of course, there are postmodernist thinkers at the Smithsonian, as there are in intellectual institutions worldwide. Do they predominate? As the vast majority of Smithsonian exhibitions attest, the answer is, Of course not. In fact, and unnoticed by Miss Mac Donald, the most prominent Smithsonian contemporary exhibition, *America's Smithsonian*, has been criticized by some as lacking narrative and viewpoint while welcomed by the vast majority of its almost three million visitors. That exhibition, touring the country, consists of a selection of important objects from all of the Smithsonian museums organized under the general topics of remembering, imagining, and discovering.

Every once in a while, an observer like Miss Mac Donald combs the vastness of the Smithsonian to seek evidence to "prove" a predetermined theory. It might be that we are too focused on popular culture, or too old-fashioned, or insufficiently inclusive, or improperly politically correct or too—you name it. We are all of them or none of them, depending on what the investigator selects to prove. That's the beauty of the Smithsonian Institution.

I. Michael Heyman
Secretary
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

Heather Mac Donald replies:

I happily concede to Secretary Heyman that there remain significant parts of the Smithsonian as yet untouched by the intellectual rot that pervades today's universities. What, however, justifies the rest? The presence of "postmodernist thinkers" in an institution is not, as Secretary Heyman would have us believe, an ineluctable fact of nature, but the result of deliberate choice. The question Secretary Heyman has not answered is whether the Smithsonian's decision to incorporate the identity politics and pseudo-theory that pass for academic research today is consistent with the Smithsonian's tradition of serious scholarship and curatorial work. I submit that it is not.

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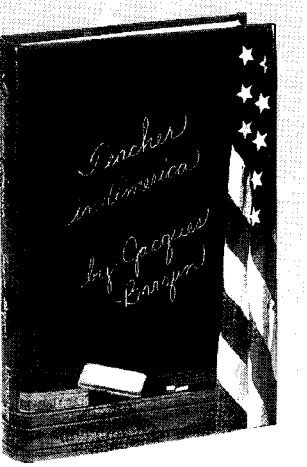

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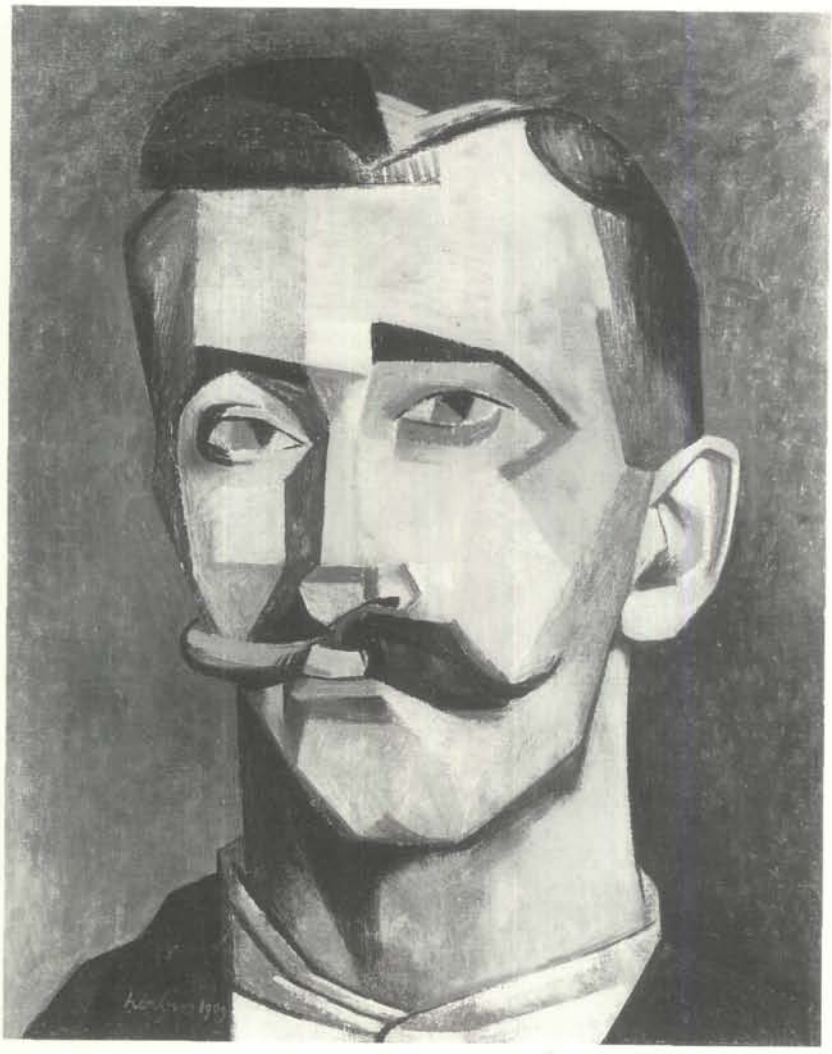

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